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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HANDWOVEN TANGAIL SARI IN THE MARKET OF CALCUTTA

Volume I

By

Dulali Nag

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HANDWOVEN TANGAIL SARI

IN THE MARKET OF CALCUTTA

By

Dulali Nag

The dissertation is a study in the construction of meaning of a commodity in the city of Calcutta in India. The commodity in question --- the sari --- is the traditional dress for women in Bengal, which is the name for the cultural region in which Calcutta is situated. In the present day world of fashion in Calcutta, a handwoven sari is also a sign of high culture. The thesis concentrates on the various ways the commodity is narrated in the market --- by the women-consumers, the producer-weavers, and the advertising and fashion media. The narrative illuminates how, in a world of capitalism and commodities, specifics of a cultural history are made use of by people to invent varied meanings for specialized commodities as strategies for positioning themselves socially and among the classes.

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INTRODUCTION

Modernity. The sign evokes many varied images, ideas and responses, depending upon the social-institutional context in which it appears. In the discourse of social-sciences, of which anthropology is one, it usually is taken to mean a cultural phenomenon that originated in the West and is thereby used as a marker of the degree of otherness in what is generally classified within this discourse as the non-West. It is taken to mean the essence of the social-cultural existence of the Western man (and woman too). The essence is, surely, historical. One of the traits of a modern Western mind is that it is consciously aware of a history that made it, and made possible its arrival to modernity. As Habermas aptly defines it: "With varying content, the term "modern" again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new".[1]

However, the meaning of the term kept changing in its specificities (though always seeing itself as opposed to some past as its other)[2]. What concerns us here is the Renaissance modernity. Anthropology as a mode of knowledge was constructed during this epoch and bears its marks. To quote Habermas again, "This most recent modernism simply

makes an abstract opposition between tradition and the present; and we are, in a way, still the contemporaries of that kind of aesthetic modernity which first appeared in the midst of the 19th century"[3].

In anthropology, the abstract distinction between modernity and tradition came to be concretized in the form of spatial differences. The spatially distant "other" also came to be marked as an "other" of modernity, i.e., as "traditional". The key characteristics of modernity, a conscious awareness of history, an awareness of the self as an individual, a political-economic organization underpinned by the capitalist ethos, came to mark the "others" as non-capitalist, non-individualistic, ahistorical. Here of course I am talking about a general tendency in anthropological thinking, keeping in mind the significant voices that have spoken against it (Singer, Cohn, Rosaldo, Rabinow). The effect was that the literature of anthropology came to be formed largely of ethnographic accounts of non-Western cultures whose primary identifying characteristic is their difference from the West. The universalist project of anthropology, that of communicating the message of a commonness shared by humankind everywhere inspite of cultural differeces, often came to take the form of overstressing the differences losing sight of the global interconnections, some universalizing predicaments, that underpin the expressions of specific differences among

cultures.

Making the predicament of the "modern" the focus of this thesis I am trying to stress the global historical connections that make the comparative studies, and the articulation of differences possible within anthropology. The concept of "modernity", of course, should not be taken as exhibiting some universally stable cultural configurations. There may be as many modernities as there are cultures. But what I take to be the universal in this array of diversities is the "modern" predicament, which consists of an awareness of a history and therefore of a self-in-time and a capitalist organization underlying the political-economic structure. How are specific cultural signs used by people as they practise as agents in history?

At the center of the thesis is thus the attempt to capture the tension between the universal and the specific, the "modern" predicament (which is universal) and a historically specific cultural form it came to assume in a certain region in India. What I have called the "modern" predicament is directly related to some structural characteristics of social organization along the lines of Enlightenment rationality. This is particularly true of modern nation-states all of which deploy the above mentioned form of rationality in ordering their society. India is a particularly good example where a large part of the social existence of Indians is directly or indirectly

controlled by the Indian state apparatus. The functional logic of the Indian state derives from the nationalist ideology which constructed itself in the image of its Other, the Rational West that was embodied by the ruling colonial power. It would be wrong, however, to assume that control and direction by the state leaves no space for the expression of the predicament of the modern in historical-cultural terms. What are the specific signs people use to make meaningful their experiences within a political-institutional structure that is modern? Does social and institutional modernization inevitably lead to a homogenization of cultural modernity? This thesis answers the second question in the negative and explores a particular situation in a modern context, that of the buying and selling of a commodity in an urban setting, to establish that point.

Anthropological thought on India in this century has obviously been concerned with this question of the relation between "tradition and the present". Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus[4], rooted in a tradition of Western scholarship on India that includes great thinkers such as Max Weber (whose work on the religion of India have inspired many anthropologists), established a paradigm of knowledge of India making caste its central problematic. Meaning of social action in India, according to this paradigm, has to be apprehended through the conceptual structure of

hierarchy that informs all actions. This conceptual structure is directly related to the hierarchical ordering of the system of caste in India.

The Dumontian hierarchy was challenged by Marriott[5] with a different model on the basis of his field experience. According to him, social interactions in India has to be understood in terms of a non-dualistic constitution of the self and the world, of the actor and the action, on the part of the Hindu Indian. The Indian person, in this paradigm, came to be perceived as "fluid", as opposed to the Western commonsense perception of the self as distinct from the other.

Both these paradigms can be clearly seen to be grappling with the predicament of the modern, that of trying to understand a tradition (Indian) in relation to a present (Western). However, neither of these approaches are directly interested in the question of the impact of Western modernity (in the form of colonization) on Indian culture and the transformations in the latter. Though Marriott's transactional analysis can be applied to understand change, the thrust of the paradigm is to construct a theory of the "tradition" of India, not its "modernity".

Another line of inquiry designed to answer precisely the question of transformation of "tradition" in India has run alongside these two paradigms. Since the questions I am

raising in my thesis are directly related to the problematic of distinguishing between "tradition" and "modernity" in metropolitan India in the present days, I shall briefly discuss these works and their approaches as a way of situating myself within an "anthropological tradition".

Interest in the "modernization" of Indian "tradition" was generated by the same tradition of social thinking in the Western world that inspired studies of Indian culture in its "traditional" form. Its immediate root can be located in the works of Max Weber who, in his book Religion of India, propounded the view that it is impossible for modern capitalism to flourish in India given the ideological formation of Hinduism that venerates caste ritualism based on the karma doctrine. Singer, in his book When a Great Tradition Modernizes takes issue with this position of Weber to bring out the adaptive traits to be found in Indian "tradition" that makes it possible for people in Indian culture to accommodate "modernity" without it directly contradicting their "tradition".

Clearly the issue here is that of a conceptualization of the notions of "tradition" and "modernity". What distinguishes one from the other in Indian culture? Singer starts off with the concept of "Great Tradition" as developed by Redfield in his project of " a social anthropology of civilizations" where he tried to introduce

a methodological combination of sociology and humanities. To quote Singer,

> the terms Great Tradition and Little Tradition distinguish the cultural content of those aspects of a culture that are regarded as "higher" from those that are considered "lower". The "higher" aspects are usually more reflective and more systematically presented and embody the greatest intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the culture. As such, they tend to be stored in "texts" of various kinds ---- oral, written, inscribed, carved and painted, sung and acted. In the Indian Great Tradition, these texts include the Vedas and Upanishads, the Dharmashastras, the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, the Bhagavatapurana, and a good many others.[6]

Singer attempts to bring together these two levels in the culture of the "Indian Civilization" by interpreting his field observations in the city of Madras. He found people in India accommodating forces of modernity by drawing upon some aspect of the Great Tradition to modify their Little Traditional acts. To quote Singer,

> their lives ... take their form and color from an imposing corpus of epics, legends, philosophies and religions, arts and sciences. The rounds of life and ceremonies move through an ancient ritual calendar; they still worship the gods of the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagavatapurana, as well as numerous local deities; their world view may be drawn from the Upanishads, their ethics from the Bhagavadgita, the Dharmasastra, and the Tirukkural; their rules of art from the Silpasastra, and their rules of medicine from Ayurvedic texts. Their worldly ambitions are guided into practice by the Arthasastra, and their spiritual inspiration is drawn from the lives and songs of poet-saints.[7]

"Tradition" and "modernity" in the Indian context thus came to be marked off from each other with the help of a

prior concept of a Great Tradition of India. Indian tradition is that which draws upon a system of Great Tradition and thereby retains its cultural identity while going through a process of modernization.

The usefulness of the concept was that it opened up a possibility of extending the range of anthropological knowledge. Until then, a major aim of anthropological studies had been to demonstrate on the basis of field work how a simple society operates as a functionally interdependent social and cultural "system". The Great Tradition, however, was conceptualised as a collection of texts the knowledge of which is vested in "a class of literati who have the authority of read and interpret the sacred scriptures...Leading personalities, such as Nehru and Gandhi, who convey their vision of the Great Tradition to the masses of the people...A "sacred geography" of holy places...A "sacred calendar" of rites and ceremonies...."[8] One could then interpret ones field observations in a larger context that avoids a static functional characterisation. This approach thus defines a new domain for anthropological thought. Where everyday lives of Indians can no longer be said to be encompassed within some pure "tradition", one can inquire into the adaptive practices that are improvised by Indians by drawing upon their Great Tradition and thereby study the transformation of a Little Tradition. The project is uniquely suited to

the anthropological enterprise based on fieldwork in spatially circumscribed locales. Fieldwork reveals to the anthropologist the adaptive stategies that people device in their practice in everyday life. On the other hand, this approach liberates the anthropologist from the limitations inherent in knowledge that is confined only to a particular space. The anthropologist, with his prior textual knowledge of the Great Tradition of India can situate these adaptive practices within that Tradition to interpret them simultaneously as change and as continuity.

Singer's approach to the study of "modernization" in Indian culture thus was a "plea for collaboration between humanistic scholars who make literary, historical studies of religious texts and social and cultural anthropologists who make direct observational studies of religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices"[7]. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture was found to be essential when the subject matter of investigation was "modernization", for in such cases one had to have a wider understanding of the context within which the apparently contradictory forces of tradition and modernity were encountering each other.

Given his interest in the process of modernization in India, urban culture in India as a conceptual (and empirical) entity became central to Singer's project. According to him, cities play two different roles in the process of cultural change:

> ...the "orthogenetic" role of carrying forward and systematically elaborating long-established local cultures, and the "heterogenetic" role of introducing or creating modes of thought and behavior that go beyond or conflict with the established local cultures....the "functional" roles and types of cities are best understood if particular cities are seen not as isolated "givens" but as historical growths from underlying patterns of urbanization and culture-change in the orbit of a civilization.[10]

The context that is crucial to Singer's ideas about the significance of cities in culture change is that of "civilization". The continuous interaction and mutual transformation of Great Tradition and Little Tradition is not possible in a pre-literate and isolated simple society but in a mature civilization that has its own texts, erudite literati, and visionary leaders who make the dialogue between the two traditions possible.

Any discussion, however brief, of Singer's approach to the question of "modernization" would be incomplete without taking into account Singer's intellectual debt to the works of M.N.Srinivas on the question of change and the form it takes in Hindu culture. Srinivas[11] discerned two major strategies used by Indians trying to socially represent themselves as belonging to a higher category. He named these two "Sanskritization" and "Westernization". Sanskritization referred to the spread of Sanskritic Hinduism, while Westernization referred to a process of adopting Western modes of life by higher castes in order to mark themselves off from lower castes who were trying to

improve upon their status by Sanskritizing their rituals. While accepting both these processes as of great importance to the process of modernization, Singer is sensitive to the plurality of the standards of Hinduism all over India and considers Sanskritic Hinduism to be only one set of it. He points to the many varieties of "popular Hinduism" that indicates the existence of more than one functional theory or ideology of Hinduism in India. One method that Singer used to identify the Great Tradition in the city of Madras was to identify the "class of learned specialists, the literati, who have a definite social structure and organization"[12] and who cultivate and transmit the Great Tradition. A second method was to study the cultural performances in the city to find out the connection between popular or little tradition and the Great Tradition.

Though Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization fails to account for the diversity of interpretations of Hinduism existing in processes of change, his conceptualization of Westernization deserves more attention. Srinivas prefers the term Westernization to Modernization because he finds the former to be "ethically neutral"[13]. Srinivas finds a process of Westernization to sometimes contribute to modernization but sometimes contradict it. In the latter case it gives rise to an ambivalence in the meaning of social action (such as the bulldozer driver who also practices "black magic").

Westernization from Srinivas' point of view, thus, is only the outward act of using Western machinery (such as driving a bulldozer), or behaving in a Western manner (such as eating on tables) but does not incorporate any Western values, which are directly linked to cultural modernity in the West. Thus he posits a distinction between "modernization" and "westernization".

There have been many other works trying to conceptualize change in India. There is no scope in this brief introduction to discuss all of them in their detail. Insightful works have been done by Bailey[14], Cohn[15], Rowe[16], Sanyal[17], to name only a few. The point to note, however, is that all of these works are concerned with change within the "traditional" structure of Indian society. Bailey did his research in a village in Orissa and wrote about the changes in the social behavior and interactions among two castes in the village, the Warrior caste and the Distiller caste. The changes came about as a result of a change in the larger economic and administrative order that touched upon the life of the villagers in important ways. As a result of these larger changes the relative economic situation of the two castes changed and affected the traditional, ritually prescribed interactions that structured social ranking among the castes until then. Cohn's work on the <u>camars</u> of Madhopur in northern India describes how the <u>camrars</u>, the socially

ranked lower castes, took recourse to Sanskritizing their rituals in an effort to enhance their status vis a vis the thakurs, the higher castes. Rowe provides a historical account of kayasthas as a caste group attempting to represent themselves as higher castes by explicit political means such as pressurising the government to be recognized as kshatriyas (a higher caste), reforming caste practices both in the direction of Westernization and Sanskritization and introducing "all-India high-status" endogamy. Sanyal's study is a similar one of status-improving strategies adopted by the telis (oil-pressers) in Bengal.

My purpose in discussing these studies of changes in Indian culture was to provide a background to the reader of the tradition of scholarly interest in the issue of the impact of colonialism on Indian culture in terms of the attempts of Indians to respond to those changes. The discussion, admittedly, does not cover the entire literature on the question of "modernization" in India. The reason I chose particularly Singer's and Srinivas' work is because their works represent an important paradigm in the study of the process of modernization in India that any later work dealing with the same question has to acknowledge and address. Though in my work I do not use the terms "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition", the general meaning that these terms signify are very much part of my approach. The reason I do not use the term "Great

Tradition" is because it has come to be associated with "classical Hindu texts" and in my fieldwork I did not encounter references to these. I did encounter innumerable references to "Tradition" which, however, drew upon texts which have been written during the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. The dynamic that I observed in the sari market in Calcutta can very well be compared with the kind of dynamic that Singer describes as taking place between the literati and the common people (this statement will become clearer as one starts reading this text). As I mentioned in my discussion of Singer's approach, the crucial context for his aprroach to the process of "modernization" in India is that of "civilization". A civilization functions on two dynamically interacting levels: one is that of a body of classical texts and a group of erudite literati, the other is that of small localized cultures which both modify and is modified by the former. My study, however, is concerned with a time in the history of Indian culture when both the institution of the State and other private institutions are making an active effort to reinterpret the concept of "Indian Tradition" as a means of producing a commodity-culture. A conscious effort is being made to construct an identity of India as a nation by means of objectifying, in many different ways, the "culture". Thus, both the texts and the interpreters are different for my study. The question that

I want to raise through my analysis of these modern day interpretations of "tradition" is: can we still justifiably use the concept of a "civilization" that is complete-within-itself to characterise modern day metropolitan culture in India? It is at this point that my analysis diverges from that of Singer. The conceptual separation between an "Indian tradition" and a "Western modernity" that underlies Singer's approach to the question of modernization of Indian culture is not tenable in the light of the fact that modern Bengali culture was constructed through explicit and often public debates about what constituted "tradition". The urban-middle class Bengalis were actively involved in defining "modernity" and "tradition" for themselves in the political context of their experience of colonial rule. Both modernity and tradition were thus social constructs that emerged through specific political contests. The new forms of cultural expressions that came to be formed during this period thus embodied the social tensions that were generated by these contests. The cultural expressions do not lend themselves to any clear distinction between what is modern and what is traditional. The processes and the outcomes (that is, the forms of cultural expressions) therefore cannot be analysed as a movement from tradition to modernization. As forms, the expressions embody a specific definition of what is modern and what is traditional depending upon the

particular history that gave rise to it.

My study was done in one regional center of modernity, Bengal to explore the question of the representation of a history of the formation of a specific cultural-linguistic form of modernity. The particular expressive form of representation I have chosen is that of people's narrations of a particular type of commodity (in this case a handwoven sari) as a means of producing it as a culturally meaningful object of consumption.

My choice of handwoven sari as the object of narration was informed by a prior knowledge of the history that produced a link between handwoven cloth as "tradition" with "modernity" in Bengal/India. Indigenous conceptualization of "modernity" was inseparable from an emerging nationalist consciousness. Nationalist thought in India (as in many other non-Western cultures) was trapped from the beginning in constructing an image of a national self, essential and complete-in-itself, in the mirror-image of its Other (the colonial West) while opposing it at the same time. "Indian Tradition" emerged as a discursive field as political leaders tried to fashion a platform from which to present their case for an independent Indian nation.[18] Nationalist politics of Gandhi argued persuasively for a return to the "village" as a means of reviving India, both spiritually and economically. Use of indigenous technology (of which handweaving is one), where the indigenous was identified

with the village, as a substitute for foreign industrial technology came to occupy a central position in the debate about the most effective strategies for fighting the colonial power. As a result the social acts of spinning, handweaving and the wearing of handwoven rather than machine-made cloth became powerfully emblematic of ones identification with the cause of the nationalist movement.

Modernity, the form in which it is found to be represented in India today, is a historical outcome of nationalist thought as outlined above. The latter tried to come of age, proclaim its own modernity, by constructing an image of its tradition and history. Handwoven textile became an important symbol in this discourse. As nationalist thought led to its "logical" outcome, the nation-state, power of the state came to be employed in constructing tradition as an object. A number of state-owned and managed institutions came into existence organized around the purpose of reviving what came to be defined as "arts and crafts of India". The All India Handicrafts Board has its branches in the major cities in India which help the state governments to formulate and implement various developmental schemes, provide guidance to craftsmen, traders, exporters, co-operative societies and other agencies connected with handicrafts. The regional offices play an important role in promoting exports, holding exhibitions, and training personnel under master

craftsmen. Alongside the Regional Handicrafts Boards there are the Regional Design Centers whose primary duty is to study traditional crafts of the region, to document traditional designs for purposes of promotion and for evolving new designs. With the object of popularising new designs and new techniques of production, these centers organise special demonstrations, displays and exhibitions.

Jawaharlal Nehru, as quoted in the Indian crafts journal Marg, said of the crafts of India

> India is set on her course of industrialization and I have little doubt that she will progressively be an industrialized country, but I do hope that this process will not put an end to the handlooms of India. I have seldom seen anything more beautiful than the handloom fabrics which we have in our country. It is craftsmanship and artistry of the highest order. As a thing of beauty and something which keeps alive our great tradition of craftsmanship, I hope every effort will be made to protect and encourage these handwoven fabrics.[17]

The meaning of handicrafts and handlooms is thus produced within the discourse of the nation-state of India as that which "keeps alive" her "great tradition and craftsmanship". The logic of the nationalist ideology is clearly being followed through, by making the modernity of India, in terms of progress of industrialization, meaningful with reference to a tradition.

The historical relation between the social formation of "art" as a specific kind of activity and the "artist" as a special kind of person in England in the context of the process of industrialization and the accompanying rise of

modernity has been described in insightful detail by Raymond Williams in his book Culture and Society[20]. With technological progress in printing and the rise in influence of a large middle class reading public, the writing of authors became increasingly commoditized. That is, from the earlier system of patronage, where the author wrote for and was sponsored by a small group of people, the new system came to be controlled by publishing houses and the author's work was now evaluated by an anonymous public in an abstract space called the "market". Though the authors could be said to be free from the caprices of a few, they (authors) increasingly felt they were now captives of the caprices of an unknown entity called the "public". The reaction of the authors of that period, among whom one can name Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth among others, was to deny legitimacy to the public as the supreme judge of their work and instead posit the concept of "Culture" as the Ideal that guided their work. Along with the development of this concept of High Culture developed the idea of the artist as a special kind of a person (as opposed to the artisan who was only a skilled worker) and art as a special kind of work. These developments in the realms of aesthetic values were also indicative of the formation of a hierarchical social relation where art and its arbiters came to occupy a superior position as compared to the "public".

The cultural meanings of works of art and its significance for social relations have been studied by other students of society and culture. Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[21] argues that technological improvements in the production of replicas of original works of art have made possible a critique of the socially produced "aura" of the original. This absolute supremacy of the original and the authentic has now come to be displaced by the multiplicity of social meanings that are now possible by way of a multiplicity of the use of these duplicates. Sociologists like Bourdieu[22] has studied how social institutions (such as educational institutions) produce social taste which in its turn serve to reproduce class distinctions. Bourdieu characterises the process of reproduction of class distinctions not only in terms of the accumulation of monetary capital but also in terms of what he calls the "symbolic capital", which is specialized cultural knowledge that can be acquired at social institutions. The social institutions themselves are structured so that only people who already have the necessary dispositions (as members of a particular class) to acquire the tastes and values taught at these institutions can succeed and thus reproduce their class. Taste in the works of art provides a point of entry to the structured social domain of authority and lack of it. The

cultural signs for the possession of authority signify the possession of "symbolic capital" which is a sign for ones high position in the ranking among the classes. In Bourdieu's analysis, a study of the cultural evaluations of works of art provide a unique vantage point to this system of social hierarchy because "art" is considered the domain of "pure" taste, completely free from any association with any material reality. As Bourdieu argues, these hierarchical oppositions between pure/impure and spiritual/material that form our perceptions of distinctive social domains are themselves products of class-distinctions. Class-distinctions produce and are produced by a system of institutions which inculcate certain kind of dispositions in social agents. The institutions themselves are structured upon the hierarchical oppositions that give form to social expressions of class-distinctions which the institutions then deploy in choosing the people who are to receive the "knowledge" the possession of which ends up conferring priviledge. Thus people who get chosen to receive the priviledge are already constituted of the distinction-producing-signs on account of their social origin. The priviledge of an authoritative position conferred by "knowledge" then legitimizes them to reproduce the social hierarchy by their authority.

A taste for the "pure", the non-functional, the essential, the for-itself in the arts can thus be

sociologically analysed to reveal the process by which a taste for the essential produces and is produced by class hierarchy. "Taste", which is normally taken to be an essence of one's person, therefore, should be seen in its social context. For example, the difference between one who describes a particular painting as "lots of squares in different colors" and the other who calls it "a late Picasso" is that the former is signifying his/her lack of special knowledge that comes with an access to authoritative information about the essential meaning of a work of art while the latter, by displaying his/her "symbolic capital", is signifying his/her social access to legitimized institutional knowledge. The "purest" of human reaction can thus be linked up with the most "material" of human existence, though the material aspect can never be separated from the cognitive perceptions that give it a social existence.

The cultural meanings of works of art and its connections with the formation and reproduction of social relations is a very complicated question. In this work I am not aspiring to answer all the questions that are connected with the formation of traditional handwoven textiles as works of arts. However, what is clear from my account of state policy in India regarding handloom and its connection with nationalist ideology is that a distinct body of knowledge grew up with eminent educated Indians

studying handicrafts and its traditions. These knowledge thus came to form a kind of "symbolic capital" in the culture of India which became the property of the educated middle class (who had easy access to the media through which these knowledge was disseminated) and functioned in the reproduction of class distinctions in India. A taste for handicraft products came to signify ones refinement which in its turn classified the person as belonging to the "elites" of the culture.

My thesis focuses on one particular form of commoditized "craftsmanship" in a particular cultural-linguistic context of modernity in India with the purpose of answering the following question: given that commodity-consumption is a predominant form of experience in everyday life in the modern world everywhere, how does one understand the "anthropology" of this global form of social act? That is, how does one read culture, in its historical form, in the acts of commodity- consumption in a specific non-Western world? The purpose of asking this question is to reexamine the notion of "culture" itself. Should culture be understood as constituted of some essential core to it that transcends temporal and spatial variations, or should it be understood to consist of representations made by people as they strive to negotiate their social position and identity in a historical context? My thesis argues for the second view of culture. By "historical" I mean here

that which has a specific meaning in a specific time and space and cannot be contained within any atemporal notion of essentiality. Viewed this way, culture as a concept gets dispersed into fragments of representations, which draw upon other representations, each of which belong to a specific historical context.

The particular craft in question is a type of handwoven sari popularly known as "Tangail sari". The name Tangail here signifies the regional-cultural origin of a particular group of weavers. The saris they weave embody the maker's social identity by being called "Tangail sari". The historical-cultural space in which my research was carried out was that of urban-middle class culture, commonly known as the bhadralok culture, in Calcutta. The commodity-object "Tangail sari" is produced in this space as a meaningful cultural-object by people by using various historical signs/codes. These signs have evolved over a historical process of formation of a specific modern culture with the formation of the city of Calcutta as a center of colonial administration. Substantively, my thesis represents some of the many ways people narrate the commodity. Theoretically, these narratives are interpreted as cultural-historical strategies used by people as a means of coming to terms with a specific form of modernity. Some of the strategies derive their meaning from the history and ideology of nationalism, some from the history of the

formation of an urban culture, some from a cultural notion of femininity produced as "tradition" vis a vis "modernity".

A point is in order here regarding the significance of the particular commodity I have chosen as the subject of my work. The importance of textiles and clothing in organizing, symbolizing, representing and expressing social relations has been well documented in sociological/historical/anthropological literature. Schneider[23], in her minutely documented article on the production and consumption of textiles in diverse cultu ral-historical contexts, clearly makes the point that as an indispensable (even in its absence) element in the process of human culture-making anywhere, clothing and variations in its style is crucial to representations and counter-representations of social distinctions that characterize power and resistance to it in a culture. Cohn's[24] historiographical article on how the British produced the Indians as knowable bodies by marking them with particular styles of clothing brings out the sociological and historical significance of distinctions in the styles of clothing in India. Bayly's[25] article on the shifts in the cultural meaning of handwoven textile in India with shifts in economic and political power opens up hitherto unexamined territories in the space of meaning of handwoven textile in India.

My thesis on handwoven sari in a commoditized form in present day Calcutta builds upon the insights of these works and the older anthropological works on the nature of the form of "modernity" in India. Given that commodity-consumption is the primary form of everyday experience in urban culture in India[24] and that the formation of urban culture is integrally linked with some form of modernity, popular interpretations of handwoven sari as a commodity in present day Calcutta provide us with representations of modernity in the form of a cultural object which has traditionally been of significant importance in the symbolization and expression of indigenous social relations.

Since this is a study of a specific historical form of modernity as represented through the consumption of a commoditized object, it is necessary here to have a brief discussion of the relation between modernity and commodity-form, and the significance of it for anthropological knowledge.

As a form of social activity understood by its practitioners to be an expression of Euro-American modernity and simultaneously a critique of that, anthropological practice has always sought to achieve this self-contradictory position by means of knowing the Other of Euro-American modernity. The result has often been a canonization of the verity of Euro-American modernity,

where the Other could be seen only as expressive of some form of non-modernity. In the brief discussion of studies of "modernization" in Indian culture, the anthropologist is found to be positing an originary opposition between tradition and modernity, structure and event, to understand the meaning of social practices in Indian culture. The very term "modernization" refers to an always already there "tradition" with respect to which the anthropologist charts the course of the changes perceived. Thus, in the case of India, the "Great Tradition" provides a stable point of reference that helps to highlight the modernizing elements in the culture. Both "tradition" and "modernity" here are defined from the outside, as two separate corpus of knowledge and action that are essentially different.

I want to argue that a modern consciousness is a global phenomenon, though it varies in its specificity given the historical contingencies within which it has to function. If the concept of "culture" has any essence to it that is one of history: history as the practitioners of any culture remember and reconstruct it and thereby produce a representation of a "culture" in the present. It is this element of historical awareness on the part of practitioners of any culture that makes modernity a universal human predicament. Surely Western modernity, especially the particular variant of it that ordered the discourse of anthropology, predicates a certain mode of

practice in the world. It is equally true that there is no "tradition" to be found among the Others of Western modernity that can be apprehended in its totality, in an essential form, outside of the various versions of it as fabricated by the practitioners with an awareness of their present position in relation to <u>their</u> Others and with an intention of shaping that relation in some particular way. In his work, Bourdieu has clearly formulated these questions regarding the practical awareness of subjects in a historical context. "The anthropologist's particular relation to the object of his (sic) study contains the makings of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (except by choice or by way of a game) in the system observed and has no need to make a place for himself there, inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practices, leading him to reduce all social relations to communicative relations and, more precisely, to decoding operations".[27] Bourdieu introduces the concept of <u>habitus</u>, the complex set of cultural-historical constraints within which informations are produced and received.

The <u>habitus</u> is not unchangeable. It is constituted of knowledge that is cultural-historical in nature, and thereby open to changes that may occur through an interaction between culture and history. The important

point about the habitus, of course, is that it brings the subject to the center of the debate about production of knowledge. As Bourdieu argues, it is not possible to comprehend culture or history except as enacted by the subject. But that performance is always an interpretation, a representation, of the constituted knowledge that is the habitus. It is practically oriented in that it is aware of its existence in time and projects its knowledge into the future. In other words, the performer is modern.

An important dimension of global modernity today is widespread technologization and commoditization. The apparent homogenizing effect of these forces often hide the historical specificities of the signifiers used to represent these fetishised forms of social relations. Hence, a study of commodity-form and the discourse governing its production as a meaningful object will illuminate significant aspects of social relations in any modern culture.

Anthropologists have stressed the importance of understanding "economic" objects in their wider cultural aspect. Sahlins[28], Tambiah[29], Douglas and Isherwood[30], have all in many different ways argued for rethinking our categories of the "economic" and the "cultural", for understanding the cultural underpinning of all "economic" actions and classifications. The meaning of a commodity, that which will be called "use value" in Marxist

terminology, is derived, according to Sahlins, from some deep cognitive structure that orders all cultural acts. According to Douglas and Isherwood, any material object has to be understood as in some way symbolizing some culturally conceived idea. The value of an object can only be comprehended in a total cultural context.

All of the above approaches, however, avoid the temporal, historical dimension to cultural meaning of objects. The thrust is towards establishing a timeless semiotic zone of "culture" that keeps reproducing itself, in some form or the other. This work approaches the question of culture from a more historical point of view. An object is produced and circulates in specific historical contexts. Its meaning thus shifts with historical shifts in the relations of power that the particular object comes to signify. Consumption or use of an object can be read as a strategy of positioning oneself in the social network of relations either to comply with or counter an existing order.

With Appadurai, I will characterize these strategic acts of consumption as representing the "politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power)" that "links value and exchange in the social life of commodities".[31]

To quote Appadurai further:

> What is political about this process is not just the fact that it signifies and constitutes

> relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same interests in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical.[32]

My study of the styles of consumption of handwoven Tangail sari thus engages in the question of the politics of social relations as are found to be practiced in the market for handwoven sari today. On the one hand it situates the commodity and its value in a context that is wider than what is understood to be "economic" in the narrow sense, on the other it takes a critical approach towards a reification of the meaning of the commodity as a "symbol" or eternally belonging to a "structure". By characterizing acts of consumption as strategic political acts it attempts to ward off a semiotic closure of the meaning of the object. There is not one meaning, but many meanings, depending upon the position of the consumer in the network of social relations. My method of analysing the commodity as constituted of signs draws largely upon the thinkings of Bourdieu[33] and Baudrillard[34], both of whom have engaged in a cultural critique of the capitalist West by way of analysing the system of signs that constitute social relations and in their turn are constituted by social relations. People, as practitioners of signs and speaking subjects, produce these signs while they

themselves are products of the signs.

Alongside, my thesis attempts to rethink the notion of "culture" itself. In choosing to characterize the historical context of my study as "modern" (and not "modernizing") I am breaching some of the established anthropological canons that have constructed non-Western cultures as radical Others of modernity. As I view it, however, this is not to undermine the spirit of anthropological inquiry but to make it multi-directional and open-ended. Positing modernity as a universal historical predicament, we can approach the question of cultural differences from many angles that subverts the centrality of the Euro-American experience of modernity. Experience of modernity varies with the differences in the history and stories about history that people bring to it. In a colonial context, as it was in India, modernity and its experience also involved an anthropology of the West from the indigene's point of view. The commodity-culture in India today uses many images and signs born out of a colonial history as signifiers for commodities. My thesis seeks to elucidate some historical signs as are found to be used in the market for handwoven Tangail saris in Calcutta.

FIELDWORK.

Research for this work was carried out in the city of

Calcutta and in the village of Fulia, which is predominantly a weavers' village. My choice of sites was determined by the focus of my research: I wanted to study how a particular piece of handwoven textile comes to be constructed as a culturally meaningful object in the context of the market where it is sold as a commodity. Fulia, which is about 200 miles to the north of Calcutta, developed as a weaving village as a consequence of two major political upheavals in the subcontinent. The first was the emergence of India as an independent nation in 1947 along with the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, and the second was the formation of Bangladesh as an independent Islamic nation in 1971. Both these events caused an enormous influx of Hindu immigrants into India and this in turn caused significant changes in the cultural-political scene in the nation. Among these immigrants were a particular caste-based group of weavers from the district of Tangail in Bangladesh who settled themselves, sometimes with some help from the government of India, primarily in three villages around a major center of weaving located in the town of Shantipur in the district of Nadia. Fulia is one of these three villages which is also the most well-reputed for handwoven saris of good quality. The saris woven by these weavers are known by the name of "Tangail sari", signifying the place of origin of the weavers who made it. The place of origin also signifies a

particular technique of weaving that is special to this group of weavers.

The city of Calcutta is the major market for these saris. Almost all the saris are sold directly to wholesalers in Calcutta who then sell these either in the city itself or to other wholesalers outside the city. The largest wholesale center in the city is in a place called Barabazar which is located in the northern part of the city. But the network of the Tangail sari market (or for that matter any handwoven sari) is not confined to Barabazar. There are numerous shops in the city who place their orders directly to the weavers and then sell the saris in the retail market. In recent years many city women, mostly housewives, have entered in the sari business on their own and buy directly from the weavers. The price of the saris vary over a wide range depending upon the area of the city where it is being sold from, the reputation of the shop for stocking "exclusive" saris and the social relation in which the seller stands to the customer. The "market", if by that we understand this complex network of distinctive spaces that confers a value to a sari, is particularly confusing to an outsider who may see one sari as the same as another but which are found to vary in their respective prices. These variations depend upon the cultural-historical meanings embedded in the everday experience of the city-dwellers which they deploy in

reading different meanings into the saris. The cultural distinctions people make in evaluating the saris bring into relief historically structured perceptions of the social world inhabited by them. My fieldwork in the city consisted of collecting data, in many different forms, on the ways in which the sari is talked about in this "market", whose location could only be found in the various historical distinctions people made in their styles of narrating the saris through which they made it "real".

Given that the focus of my research was the "Tangail sari" as a commodity in the market of Calcutta, I decided to begin my inquiry among the women in the city who are the primary buyers of this commodity. My entry into this world was facilitated by the fact that I had grown up and spent twentythree years of my life in this city before coming to the U.S. and become an anthropologist. If we characterize the "culture" of a city by the language spoken (formally and informally), the style of dresses worn , the social activities structuring the lives of majority of the people living in the city, then culture of Calcutta can be identified with the culture of the Bangla[35] speaking people who are most commonly either professionals (such as teachers, professors, lawyers, doctors) or are engaged in the service sector in various capacities. It is this group of people I shall refer to as the "urban middle class Bengalis" in my work. This is not to say that there are no

other marginalized groups who do not contribute to the cultural scene of the city, nor is it to say that the "urban middle class Bengali" culture is a completely homogeneous culture. In fact, my study will show how a complex of historical diversities came to form what is generally referred to as "urban middle class Bengali" culture and how these diversities are kept alive by the people in their everyday lives. The category of "urban middle class Bengali", however, provides us with a good provisional definition to begin our inquiry with. I am from this culture myself and it is the women of this culture who constitute the majority of the buyers of these handwoven saris. As it is, sari has been the traditional garb for women in this part of India, though in the last five or ten years other forms of dresses have begun to encroach upon this rule.

I started off by renewing my acquaintance with women I knew from before, choosing from among them the ones I knew to be avid sari shoppers and generally knowledgeable about saris. My network of women informants in the city grew exponentially as I was introduced to other women in their network, and from theirs to still others. Of course it has not been possible for me to make a comprehensive survey of women from all the social strata in this culture and an element of randomness is present in the account. However, given that the purpose of the study was to find out how the

meaning of the commodity is constructed by women in various social-historical positions the randomness does not entirely invalidate the project though it does provide a partial picture.

The data I collected from these women made me aware for the first time how "uncertain" or "indeterminate" the meaning of the commodity is. By uncertainty/indeterminacy I do not mean that every single consumer was uncertain about the meaning and value of the commodity she was planning (or not planning, as the case may be) to buy, but that every reading sought to establish its own authority as opposed to other possible readings by using certain specific cultural-historical codes/signs, indicating thereby the lack of any <u>one</u> authoritative meaning of the object. The enormous range of variation in price, quality and variety to be found in the market, when taken together with this plethora of different readings of the same object (i.e., one signified in general as Tangail sari), prompted me to ask the question: how are the weavers of these saris linked to this social practice of producing meanings? How do they contribute to it? Or do they?

The next phase of my fieldwork was done in the village of Fulia, trying to answer this question. Though the village is predominantly a weavers' village, there are a few families whose menfolks work in bureaucratic positions in various government offices in Calcutta or in nearby

towns such as Ranaghat or Shantipur. With introduction from some city women who do business with weavers there, I visited a couple of weavers to inquire into the possibilities of staying with a weaving household. My obvious city-connections, however, marked me too much as an outsider for them to accept me on a daily basis within their households. Very politely but firmly they pointed out to me how inconvenient it would be for a city person like me to live in the "house of a poor person" (goriber baritey). I was a "rich person" (borolok), as compared to everyone living in the village who are "poor" (gorib). The cultural lines were drawn between the "city" and the "village", the former signifying riches and the latter poverty, and the "poor weavers" did not want to take the trouble of putting up a "rich person" like me. Though in terms of income some of the weavers were not poor as compared to many of the people who worked in very low positions in government offices, the distinctions were made more on the basis of life-style that was seen as a reflection of ones education and refined tastes. The weavers as a group are very sensitive about their lack of formal education and are prone to rationalize their "poverty" in relation to the "riches" of the city people in terms of that. Finally one of my city acquaintances came up with a possibility. A colleague of her husband had a distant relation who lived in Fulia. This was among the

group of non-weaving households in Fulia. They agreed to take me on as a paying-guest. Thus my fieldwork in Fulia took off.

I got to know Fulia in two stages. The first stage was when I was making some train-trips to Fulia to talk to weavers to find a place to stay and also get myself a little acquainted with the geography of the area. During this time, since my figure still was not familiar to most of the people in the village as the "Calcutta-woman-doing-research", I was often taken to be a sari-buyer from the city. During this time I used to take a rickshaw to take me around the village to talk to various weavers with whom I wanted to establish a connection and also find a place to stay. The rickshaw-drivers usually took me to be another gullible city-woman-to-be-taken-for-a-ride (which was not entirely incorrect) and used all kinds of ploys to get an extra buck out of me. This period revealed a side of the village culture to me that I would call its "Tourist Culture"; that is, this is the side that the people in the village present to all the city people who visit them for the purpose of purchasing, which is a tourist's mode of objectification. I have tried to give the reader a taste of it in chapter seven where I describe some of these experiences.

The second stage of my involvement with Fulia began when I started to live there as a paying-guest with a

family. Since I was already acquainted with some of the weavers, I started off by trying to consolidate my friendship with them. The initial difficulty was that I was not taken seriously enough. First I was a woman, second I was from the city and third I was also "from America". Why would I be interested in knowing about the "poor" weavers? Initially they were always very polite, but everytime I tried to ask some question about their work or social activities the response was generally "our life? What is there to tell? You have seen so much of the world, what do we have to tell you? We are poor weavers. We only know how to weave." Of course the responses were made respectfully, with the respect that is due to someone who is superior to you in status. Thus I was always referred to as aapni, the honorific form of address, by all weavers. This phase, however, gradually wore off as I persisted, and as they found out that I was not planning to take off for America or for the city very soon. Also some of them had started to eye me as a potential customer with good possibilities. After all I was a woman and must be interested in good saris. In fact I found out that it was easier to broke open their reserve if I started asking them about particular saris first and branch off to more general questions from there. The weavers who fell in the mahajan category, i.e., those who did not weave themselves but subcontracted to smaller weavers either by advancing cash or yarn and then

acted as mediators between the city buyers and the small weaver, were more acute in answering my questions. This was for several reasons. One was that they were less uncomfortable with the "city type" for having had to deal with them on a regular basis; second they, more than a small weaver, were interested in developing a good connection in the city that might lead to profitable sale; third these were also the ones with social aspirations where a friendship with someone, whom they perceive to be possessing a high status in the urban circle, will lend more social status to their position, both within the village and among their urban customers. It was beneficial for me too, for they knew more, than the small weaver, about the intricacies of the market network as a necssary part of conducting business.

The third stage of my fieldwork was done in some of the newpaper and news magazine libraries in Calcutta to collect advertisement writings and fashion literature to find out how this commodity is portrayed by the media. I limited my search only to writings that have come out since the early seventies, for I had gathered from my informants that handwoven saris came into high demand and became a fashion item since that time. These literature provided me with a different angle of vision on the question of production of meaning of this commodity. The signs and codes used in the writings reveal the culture of the

intended readership and thereby an attempt at producing a mass culture in the image of that constructed culture.

The data I collected thus consisted of the many different ways the city women, the weavers and the media represented the object, handwoven sari. The thesis is a representation of that data in a particular mode. The mode derives from my trying to retain the multi-vocality of my fieldwork experience and at the same time situate the speaking subjects in a specific historical context that constitutes the meaning of their representations.
Theoretically, the thesis is an attempt at trying to rethink the notion of "Indian culture" in the light of my data. As I have already discussed, anthropological studies of "Indian culture" has, with some exceptions, been cast within a paradigm of Hinduism functioning with what was considered its essential accessory, the caste system. Be it a Dumontian structuralist approach or an "exchange model" approach along the lines of Marriott, the ideological framework has generally been derived from some model of interactions among castes in Indian society.
It falls outside the scope of this thesis to go into the complex intellectual history of the development of anthropological thought on India, but the general outcome of this emphasis on Hindu caste ideology as the essence of "Indian culture" has led to a neglect of studies of evolving forms of cultures in India, especially in

metropolitan areas. Metropolitan cultures in India, like any other metropolitan cultures, are greatly conditioned by modern technological advances, subjected to communication through mass media and has to bear the full thrust of elite politics that seeks to influence opinion by controlling, manipulating and coopting popular cultural idioms (such as religious, mythological, artistic) through the mass media. Cultural forms in metropolitan areas thus embody the tension generated by the contests between "variety of producers of culture and their audiences"[34]. Since commodity-consumption is one of the most important means of cultural representation in metropolitan cultures, one can attain significant insights into these emergent forms of cultures by focusing on how a commodity is fashioned, by consumers and producers alike, in a metropolitan market. The picture of "culture" that one derives from such studies is not a "whole", nor is it a "system", nor is it encompassed within a single cultural ideology. Yet this is not to announce the death of "cultural analysis" and herald in a global cultural homogenization. Indigenous cultural forms exist as used by people in different ways to signify their position (intended or actual) in the existing network of social relations and thus engage in the contest of making of culture. The forms of these cultural images are thus necessarily broken, fragmented, forms wrenched out from their traditional contexts, and are now being used to

produce a different cultural configuration.

I have used the concept of "story" as a means of characterizing these broken, fragmented forms of cultural representations as I have come across in the market of Tangail saris. "Story" is commonly used as opposed to some kind of "reality". Story is fictional whereas reality stands for the Truth. I have used "story" to make use of this opposition in order to make the point that the line between "truth" and "fiction" is hard to draw: culture, as is found in these accounts of sari buying and selling, is "fictional" in the sense that each narrator is drawing upon a different history (a personal history which is embedded in a larger social history) to evaluate the saris differently and thereby also represent their own social positions. I am using "story" here also in the broader sense in which de Certeau has defined it:"it is a detour by way of a past ("the other day", "in olden days") or by way of a quotation (a "saying", a proverb) made in order to take advantage of an occasion and to modify an equilibrium by taking it by surprise. Its discourse is characterized more by way of <u>exercising itself</u> than by the thing it indicates."[37] Defined thus, a "story" is anything that is recounted in society with the purpose of presenting a particular account of reality. A story mediates between the listener and a reality, and the storyteller acts as the mediator. When a woman gives an account of how and where

she buys Tangail saris, she is not providing the listener with any "true" account of the qualities of the sari she buys. Instead, she is representing a particular, singular perception of reality within which she orients herself in evaluating the saris. It is in this sense that the narrators, the consumers are "singular"; not that they exist outside of culture and history in some homogenized world of "individuals", but as speaking subjects who choose fragmented images and signs from history to produce a specific account of a reality.

Structural analysis of narrative theory has long distinguished between the invariant component, the story, in a narrative structure and its mode of articulation, its discourse. To quote one eminent scholar: "Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (histoire) [that is] the content...and a discourse (discours), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated".[38]

This two leveled model of narrative structure has, however, been criticised on various grounds, some of which are relevant for my presentation. As has been pointed out by Herrnstein Smith, the concept of a "basic story" independent of its "versions" or any surface manifestation or expression "occupies a highly privileged ontological realm of pure Being within which it unfolds immutably and eternally...it is clearly unknowable --- and, indeed,

literally unimaginable --- by any mortal being."[39] Herrnstein Smith rightly argues in her article that it is logically impossible to find out the story behind any version of it and that no narrative version can be independent of a particular teller and occasion of telling. Any narrative version is therefore constructed in accordance with some set of purposes or interests. There are other theorists who agree with Herrnstein Smith's position. One among them is Ross Chambers, who observes that what is lacking in structural analysis is "recognition of the significance of situational phenomena --- of the social fact that narrative mediates human relationships and derives its "meaning" from them"[40].

This way of looking at a story, that is, not as a structure but as an "act" or a "performance", allows us to conceptualise "story" more broadly. I shall follow Herrnstein Smith again to define a story "most generally as verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened...Indeed, narrative discourse is, at one extreme, hardly distinguishable from description or simple assertion. That is, "telling someone that something happened" can, under certain circumstances, be so close to "saying that something is (or was) the case" that it is questionable if we can draw any logically rigorous distinction between them..."[41] It frees us from having to think of a story necessarily coming with the conventional

plot markers. The most important characteristic of a story is that it is a social transaction, that it always involves two parties, and that each party must have some interest in telling or listening to that narrative.

It is in the above sense that I have used the concept of story in my text. My presentation, however, becomes even more complicated as my voice as a story-teller is added to all the other stories I have been told. If all story-tellings are performative acts with a particular interest, then to what extent can the voice of the story-teller be distinguished from that of other stories that she has been told by others? Is this not the predicament of all story-tellers? The various modes of presentation I have used in my text has been to raise this question in many different forms, but I cannot claim to have resolved it. As it is impossible for me to hide my voice (after all I am telling/writing), I have tried to mix the other voices with their particular style of exposition with my telling of their stories. I have tried to preserve the world-views and the interests of those other story-tellers in my telling, but the difficulty of making a clear distinction, while myself engaged in the act of telling, has persisted all through my act.

The above predicament is indicative of the cognitive distinction that is conventionally made between the actual act of fieldwork and the act of writing it up to tell about

it to a particular audience. This distinction is also institutionally upheld by making a distinction between the method employed in research and the content of factual information in it. The distinction, however, is often unclear. For one thing, the act of fieldwork is always inscribed on some prior acts of reading and is thus already related to some form of writing, that is, some organized representation of a reality that derives its meaning from the particular style of organization itself. Secondly, the later act of writing up the fieldwork experience as an ethnographic account makes a retrospective cognitive distinction even more difficult. The experience of fieldwork is given meaning, to ones own self and to others, in the form of the ethnographic account. Once written, the ethnography signifies a socially-institutionally acceptable form that personal experience must assume in order to have any practical relevance. In other words, our fieldwork experience has no meaningful existence except in the form of ethnographic writing, where the latter is enmeshed in academic-institutional practice at a particular point in time.

A few words are in order here regarding the organization of the material in the body of the thesis. The theme of the work is to represent in writing how a commodity, Tangail sari, is meaningfully constructed in the space of the market in Calcutta. As I have argued in the

discussions above, the meanings are produced by the consumers, producers and the mass media from many different angles, telling stories about different histories. The meaning of the commodity that emerges in each particular instance is a contested one, where the story is trying to make space for its particular version by displacing others. However, even though each story is "singular" in this sense, the producers and the consumers are brought together, along with the commodity, through a complex financial-organizational network. The uncertainty/indeterminacy of meaning of a commodity as will be evidenced in the data is supported by this organizational grid that allows for such indeterminacy to exist in the market. In chapter one I have analysed some advertisement writings and fashion literature on handwoven saris to bring out how some historically constructed oppositions are brought into play in these writings to produce an image of a "woman" and "tradition" that together attribute an aesthetic quality to handwoven saris. It is a historically-culturally specific sense of aesthetic that draws upon many powerful imageries to commodify the object. In the second chapter I have provided a history of the development of the idea of a "modern" woman in Bengal and its relation with some of the important modernist movements that were going on in Bengal during that time. The idea is to enable the reader to understand better the meanings of

some of the social-cultural oppositions that are used by women in their readings of the saris. The third and the fourth chapter attempts to weave together some descriptions of the organizational features of the marketing network to give the reader an idea of how differences in the meaning of the commodity is backed by a complex social and economic framework. The fifth chapter provides some women's telling of their stories about how and where they buy saris. These accounts provide a rich description of how women present their selves through their styles of commodity-consumption, or their stories about their styles. The sixth chapter explains some of the cultural-geographical categories that lend meaning to some of the distinctions the women make in their narratives. Most of these categories are integrally linked with the growth of Calcutta as an urban center. So, indirectly, this chapter also provides a fragmented account of the history of development of Calcutta. Chapter seven provides a description of the village and some of the weavers' stories about the commodity they produce. It is meant to introduce a voice from the other end of the social spectrum to enrich the effect of multi-vocality that characterizes the Tangail sari market. The concluding chapter is an attempt at adding my voice to all the other story-telling voices, to stress the fact that this thesis is another story about the object told by a particular teller to a specific audience in a historical conjuncture

that has brought the teller and the audience together.

The chronological ordering of the chapters was informed by my concerns about telling the story in a particular way. I have deliberately juxtaposed apparently unrelated accounts such as the chapter on advertisement and fashion writing and the second chapter on organization of sales network of Tangail saris. The purpose is to bring it to the attention of the reader that the space of the market for handwoven sari is constituted of many different images each of which represents a particular way of ordering reality. These different accounts coexist, sometimes complementing sometimes displacing each other, and thereby contribute to the multi-dimensional nature of the reality that is the market. Taken together, the chapters should provide the reader with some idea of the various historical, economic and social relations that structure representations, interactions and exchange in the market and how people, positioned at various points in these structures, make socially and historically conditioned choices as they all engage in producing "culture".

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    During ritual festivals like Durga Puja the average Bengali conventionally buys lots of cloths, for gift purposes and also for his or her own self. The Puja can be described as the most commoditized form of festival in Calcutta. It is the time for the sellers of commodities to make a profit and for the consumers to

buy. It is the most important gift-giving ritual in Calcutta which has turned it into the most important shopping season in Calcutta.

Experience of living in a city is thus primarily through buying commodities and being exposed to commoditized forms of images. By "commoditized forms of experience" I mean objects that can be acquired and experiences that can be had only in exchange for money.

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CHAPTER I

A PORTRAIT OF THE WEAVER AS AN ARTIST

Handwoven saris, of all variety, figure in the mass media communication in the form of advertisement and fashion literature. I am concerned here with the question of the construction of meaning of this commodity by the media in the form of some culturally perceived images. Mass media as a form of communication is an important element in the experience of modernity. The messages that are contained in these communications are fabricated out of cultural-historical codes that inform the intended readership of some form of "use value" for the object. The question I am asking here is not how the messages are received and dealt with by the intended audience, but what are the cultural images and categories chosen and juxtaposed by the media to represent a cultural meaning for the commodity. The obvious purpose for the media is to generate sale for the commodity by means of producing desire for it in some culturally recognizable form. My objective here is to analyse the representational strategies that seek to produce desire, or more accurately, locate satisfaction of it in the consumption of the commodity. The method I have employed in analysing has been to try to locate a particular image in the prevailing

cultural practices of classification as they have evolved through the period of formation of a "modern" culture in Bengal. The purpose has been to bring out the cultural-historical specificity of the language used by the media. If the signifying elements found in this language is taken to refer to "a reality", its signified, whose reality is it? Whose fantasies and desires have become codified to represent aesthetic categories? The commodity, as we know, is a dress for women and woven by weavers in the village. Whose reading of the commodity and its qualities are written in these representations?

Without further elaboration, I invite the reader to a guided tour through the space of advertisement and fashion-writing as are to be found in Calcutta today.

"She who is waiting (for me) is wearing a Dhakai sari with sindur on her forehead"[1] ____ TANTUJA is Engaged in Making This Eternal Image Created By Our Poet into a Reality.

The above excerpt is from an advertisement by Tantuja (the state owned agency for selling handloom sari). The line they have quoted is from a poem by the venerated Bengali poet Rabindranath Thakur. The poem describes the emotional stupor and the sordidness of existence in the life of a junior clerk in the city of Calcutta. A female

relative, lovingly trying to bring some sunshine and laughter in his life, arranges a marriage for him with a girl in her village. The man runs aways from it. He does not want to get the girl involved in the sordidness of his existence. He rationalizes, "atleast the girl was saved from this fate, and I am no worse off" (meyeta to rokkha pele, aami tathoibacha). Instead, he prefers to cherish her image, untarnished, in his heart. "She will never come to my home, but she will always frequent my imagination" (ghorete elona shey to, mone taar nitya jaoa aasha). He imagines her as waiting for him wearing a Dhakai sari with sindur on her forehead. In his imagination, she is forever his (marked by the sindur).

The cultural-aesthetic quality of the poem lies in its capturing the nostalgia of the urban Bengali for the "village" that he has left behind, and with it all the truth, beauty and goodness of his life. The man's pishi (father's sister, the loving relative) who tried to arrange his marriage lives in a village, by the side of the river Dhaleshwari (Dhaleshwari noditire pishider gram). The figure of the pishi stands out as a tangible bond with human emotions and affects for the city man. She symbolizes the deep and permanent bond of kinship connections as opposed to the anonymous, interest-based relations of the city. It is also the figure of a female. Affection and warmth flows from the village to the city, tempering the

latter's inhumanity and heartlessness. These are two clearly dichotomized worlds in the perception of the city man. Redemption for the city lies in acknowledging this Past (in the form of village/tradition), in bringing it into its Present (city/modernity). The poet introduces the village very succinctly (pishi's village is by the side of the river Dhaleshwari). The only picture we get of the village is that the river Dhaleshwari, with its banks deeply shadowed by trees, flows by its side (sheikhaney bohi chaley Dhaleswari, teerey tomaler ghano chaya). Its wealth of meaning is signified by the unadorned simplicity of his description. Its wholeness, its integrity is captured by the specificity of the poetic name of the river. There is no excess of images there, as opposed to the rather meaningless juxtaposition of disparate objects (a piece of rotten fish, a dead kitten, remains of jackfruit and mango, ashes from a coal-burner in someones kitchen) on the heap of rubbish by the side of the narrow alley where he has his quarters. The dark shadows cast by the monsoon clouds is experienced by him in his damp, cramped room as a half-dead animal caught in a trap (kaley pora jontur mato murchay ashar). The poet, in the voice of this man, describes the very air of the alley as bibhatsa (hideous), imagerially represented by the juxtaposition of unrelated objects.

Escape from the hideous lies in reestablishing

connection with the village by marrying a woman from there. The colonized-urbanized-nostalgic-masculine imagination conflates the woman and the village together with meaning and beauty in life, albeit one whose reality is unattainable.

The image of this woman is described as "eternal" (chirantan)in the ad. The Bengali male psyche forever seeks its origin, its peace, its beauty in her, who is from the village. She never changes. The sindur on her forehead is forever (i.e., she is forever attached to a male). Forever she sits there, beautiful in her Dhakai sari, serenely awaiting her man/husband.

In the poem the man had to run away from a real encounter with this woman. He had to because his reality could not have accommodated the reality of her. For the present day Bengali male, however, there is hope. Hope comes to him in the form of Tantuja, who are behind making a "Reality" of this "Eternal Image". They are making Dhakai saris available, for all and sundry, in the form of a purchasable commodity. Why did the man in the poem run away in the first place? Why did he feel he could not make his ideal image into a reality? Because Dhakai saris were too expensive? Because he will not be able to keep his beloved dressed in that ideal garment? One can only speculate. But at least that seems to be the implicit suggestion in the ad. It assures the present day male and female of Bengal

(the bhadralok and the bhadramahila respectively) that now the dream is realizable across the counter of Tantuja (supposedly it is now less expensive). At long last, the alienated Bengali consciousness (a masculine one that tries to subsume the feminine) will be able to get back to its lost origin, its "village", its "woman", thanks to Tantuja, thanks to advancement in marketing mechanisms.

The weaver of the Dhakai sari, however, is not a part of this story of a city-man's sense of loss.

This theme of a lost origin and nostalgia for it is found over and over again in advertisement literature now-a-days. The modern times are the best times to live our past, because it is now purchasable. The Calcutta based Bengali bhadralok culture that started to produce itself in the nineteenth century by translating western liberal-humanitarian-modernism in its own language and culture came to see itself in opposition to its tradition/village and at the same time tried to reappropriate this alienated Other by fusing it with the image of the feminine. The opposition was not always very clear cut and it varied in its specificities. Its reality, however, was undeniable. Bengali Culture (literature, music, visual art) constantly represented its world in terms of these dichotomies. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the first novelist in Bengali language, created the image of Bengal as the Mother in his celebrated work Anandamath, which is a sort of historical

novel in which a group of sanyasis (world-renouncers, saints) are shown to be trying to restore the dignity and independence of their motherland. They refer to themselves as the shontan dal (the community of sons) in relation to the Mother, i.e., the motherland, "well-watered, fertile, cooled by the breeze, covered with green crops." This Mother is the land of Bengal (Bangladesh). Bande Mataram (hail to thee, Mother), the theme song of Anandamath, later became the slogan for the activists in the freedom movement in Bengal. After Bankimchandra, Rabindranath Thakur took up the "cause". His songs and poems abound in allusions, direct and indirect, to the mother, the female, residing in the heart of Bangladesh. He finds her hair flowing in the dark monsoon clouds (tomar mukto kesher punjo meghe), garbed in a sari made of the shimmering yellow rays of the sun (tomar aanchal jhale aakashtole roudrabashani). Again, he pays his respect to her, his beautiful mother Bengal (namo, namo, namo, shundari momo janoni bangabhumi) who soothes and cools his inflamed psyche with the cool breeze on the banks of the river Ganga (gangar teer snigdho shomeer jeeban jurale tumi). In his songs on nature he often animates the elements with feminine attributes: you came back in the form of the monsoon, engulfing me in your aanchal[12] of clouds (aabaar srabon hoey eley phire, megho-aanchaley niley ghirey); the aanchal of my love sways with the swaying of the deep green forest (aamar priyar aanchal

doley, nibir boner shyamal uchchashey); She kept turning back as she was leaving. That gaze of hers is lingering in the shadows (shei baare baare phire phire chaoa chchayay royeche legey). It should be noted that here nature is always identified with the countryside. There is no nature in the city. The maker of this Culture was the "modern Bengali man" (aadhunik Baangali bhadralok), the city-man. In another chapter I have discussed the history of the emergence of the "woman" in this class. The woman was produced, dressed in a certain manner that upheld the tenets of the bhadralok culture and at the same time safeguarded the bhadralok's sense of identity derived from his ghor (his home), his "private" self that sought to retain its autonomy from his "public", westernized self so long as the two did not come into conflict. The woman-figure thus came to be conflated with the "modern" man's alienated Other (though the history of the construction of the "woman" by the man under colonization is more complicated than this, here I am only focusing on the aspect where in a public realm the woman came to symbolize a lost, alienated "tradition". In other words, she became a fetish), his "village", his "tradition", his "essence".

Handloom weaving is conceptually associated with "village". A long and complicated history of the nationalist movement lies behind this association (which I shall talk about later). That way, handloom weaving and its

products are a fetishised representation of the urban man's lost origin. A conflation of these three images (handloom weaving, village, woman) recurs in the literature of the commodity culture.

It is necessary at this point to say something about the method I employed to interpret these texts that allows me to draw sociological-anthropological inferences from it. The problem one faces when trying to interpret anonymous texts directed at an equally anonymous general "public" is in trying to decide whose meaning constitutes the true meaning of these texts. Is it that of the particular person writing the copy, or that of the author whose writing is being quoted, or the different meanings that each reader arrives at as he/she reads the text? In trying to deal with this problem of "truth" in interpretation, I decided to treat the writings in their context and thereby derive a meaning in terms of the "interest" that the writings are expected to serve. In other words, I avoided asking the question: what did a particular author of an advertisement copy had in mind while writing the copy or what exactly a particular reader (male or female) had in mind while s/he read it? The reason for this was that any attempt at trying to interview the readers would have yielded a random sample and thereby be always open to a question of the general validity of the interpretation. Likewise, an attempt to ferret out the actual author of a particular copy of

advertisement would still have left the question open in terms of the meaning that was being conveyed to the "actual" reader. Instead, I treated the texts partly from a structural and partly from a historical point of view in the particular context within which they appeared. By "context" I mean here the market where the purpose of putting out an advertisement is to induce people to buy --- to produce desire for the object. The question for me then was to decipher the cultural-historical codes that were being used in the texts that are expected to produce that effect. Surely the expectation relies on some kind of knowledge of the codes on the part of the target readership. Expressions such as "the Bengali male psyche" or "oppositions constructed by educated-urbanized Bengali men" derives from a historical/sociological knowledge of the literature from which the advertisements were quoting. The particular authors being quoted were "educated-urbanized Bengali males" and hence can be interpreted as expressing a masculine point of view. The use of such writing in advertisements can be read as an attempt to attribute a masculine meaning on an object that is a women's garb, and thereby a masculine attempt at constructing the "feminine". My method of interpretation thus took into account some of the historical-sociological background of the authors whose writings are being used in modern day advertisements to infer from that how the text

is being used to construct meaning of a feminine attire from a masculine point of view.

Let us take a look at another such:

"Looking at the distant horizon, at the end of the wide expanse of the field, I see a bird swooping down with a shrill cry, the cattle in its ranch.... ah! the village is in sight" (Satyendranath)...That Village Is Still There. The Village-Culture Cannot Be Obliterated. If We Do Not Have The Palanquin, We Still Have The Hand-fan, The Poush Ritual, The Sweet Pithey. And We Have The Tradition Of Our Art Of Handloom And Along With That We Have TANTUJA, With The Handwoven Clothing of Bengal.

The lines quoted in the above advertisement is from a poem by Satyendranath Datta describing typical scenes from everyday life in village-Bengal (gram-bangla) as seen from a palanquin (a covered chair-car carried by men. It was a common mode of transport for the upper-castes, specially women, in the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century). The poem is atypical in that it does not overtly try to poeticize the beauties of the village. Rather it provides a series of distinct shots of everyday life as it is glimpsed from the passing palanquin. The pace and rhythm of the poem represents the now slow

now fast pace of the palanquin bearers and with quick strokes the poet draws one picture after another of village life.

Tantuja assures us,"that village is still there". The Bengali need not lament his lost origin. Even though the palanquin has become extinct, village-Bengal is still alive with its hand-fans (haat pakha), its rituals (signifying continuity, stability, order), its homemade sweets (pithey). And, of course, its traditional asset handloom weaving is waiting to be bought by the nostalgia ridden Bengali, from the shops of Tantuja.

Let us look a little more closely into the text. Village-Bengal is "still there". How do we know that? Not by knowing about the details of the toils of the poor farmer, nor by observing the interactions of the castes, nor by knowing how handwoven clothing is actually produced. We know of its existence by looking at the hand-fan, enjoying traditional ritual and homemade sweets, buying a handloom sari. All the images center around an imaginary home where an imaginary woman moves about wearing handloom sari, making the ritual sweetly enjoyable by making the pithey (may be also fanning the man with the hand-fan?). Once again, woman, village, tradition, essence all merge into each other to strengthen the assertion, "that village is still there".

Another example:

"I would say this emphatically, if I have to buy anything in the Puja market then I would definitely choose the indigenous Dhakai handwoven clothing over the foreign mill woven cloth from Bombay and do so with pride, without any embarrassment. Many many ages of loving skill of this land of Bengal is woven into that cloth." (Rabindranath Thakur)

TANTUJA: The Handwoven Cloth of Bengal.

The above excerpt is from a prose writing by the same poet, Rabindranath Thakur. It does not need much explication as it is.

Once again, the "reason" to buy indigenous handwoven cloth is that it is the form which contains the "love" (along with skill) associated with the "land of Bengal". Land here does not include the modern/western/city. Bangladesh, the word I translated as land of Bengal, stands for the indigenous in all its purity and authenticity. Blessed by the great poet, Tantuja has taken up the noble responsibility of supplying this "many many ages of loving skill of the land of Bengal" to the until-now-unfortunate city people of Bengal in the form of handwoven clothing.

Since all of these advertisements quote from what is considered as "classics" in Bengali literature, it is important at this point to discuss briefly the significance of such advertisements from a sociological point of view.

Of course the very fact that advertisements, which are meant for the "public", use quotations from literature in itself speaks of a perceived common knowledge on the part of the makers of the ads. For the average urban-educated Bengali (male or female) the name and the significance of Rabindranath Thakur as a literary figure is common knowledge by virtue of the fact that his writings are mandatory in any vernacular syllabus in high school and college. The association of Rabindranath's writings with handwoven sari inevitably conjures up an image of "high culture" as Rabindranath is commonly known by urban Bengalis to be an aesthete of the highest order. The importance of literature, in this context, however, is a construction. The advertisement text is producing the importance of literature anew by associating it with a commodity for sale. The purpose is to establish an aesthetic connection between "literature" and "sari".

Fashion Writing and Handwoven Sari

The social space of handwoven sari, of which Tangail sari is one, is thus ordered by means of this opposition modern:traditional :: city:village :: male:female, constructed by the educated-urbanized-Bengali men in an attempt to forge a History of their own. In a commodity culture, however, Tangail sari is also read as the sign of fashion. The very essence of fashion is its temporality.

Its meaning is derived from cutting up time into distinct pieces and marking each one with a style, thus producing a faster rate of obsolescence in clothing than the rate at which it wears out. But if handwoven sari represents tradition and its foreverness then how does fashion and its accompanying change work in this space? How can Time be broken up into fragments if what is being represented is the "eternal"? How can the timelessness of tradition be fitted into the world of profit-making that produces the "new" at regular intervals?

I shall quote here from some written fashion features that came out in a popular Bengali magazine, Anandalok, between 1974 and 1985. The magazine is a monthly one and focuses primarily on news from the film-world. The fashion features come out once a year, with the special issue that comes out with the Puja, the major yearly religious-social festival in Bengal. It is also one major yearly occasion when new clothing is exchanged as gifts among kins and also bought for oneself. Thus, it is the major sari buying season.

Anandalok, Puja number 1984:

SARI IN THE FASHION SCENE

"Granny put a piece of betel-leaf filled with her favorite spices into her mouth and commented: I don't really understand what the matter is with you people. The Pujas are close, and all you are concerned about is

Fashion! .... Her youngest daughter asked: in your days what did you do mom? The old lady came back with a spirited reply: We? We used to go and show our respect to the image of the goddess wearing wide red bordered saris!.... The debate took off with everyone joining in it with enthusiasm. Not all the participants were young women (toruni) or teenagers (kishori). There are middle aged (prae prourha) and even older women (purna prourha) among them. Everyone is equally interested in talking about saris and their varieties...."[3]

From this narrative about women of different ages and their opinions and positions regarding saris the author then switches into an objective narrative mode, expressly in his/her own voice, in describing the various kinds of handloom saris available:

"At the end I want to come to the Bengal Handloom sari, which represents the glory of Bengal. Here, however, one almost loses sight of the forest for the trees. The art of handwoven sari of Bengal has blossomed like a lotus.... young girls, teenagers, middle aged women, older women, whoever it is, will find something to her choice. No matter where you look at saris, under the dim light of a sidewalk shop or the bright neon lights of a big shop, you will lose your heart to these saris. Dhanekhali, Shantipuri, Begampuri, Tangail, everyone is coming up with new designs, a flood of variety that was unimaginable even

a few years ago. There is no end to the variety of color of the doore or the choukhupi. Then there is the cool and pure (snigdho, shuchi) grace of muga, orchestrated by a silk border providing one with a visual image of music (raga-ragini) flowing over the sari. In some cases cotton have been combined with silk to create a more engrossing aalaap (a sort of preamble to any raga). Pure silk (resham) shines with a royal dignity (raggir mato) in silk Tangail saris. Within this there are bright and delicate colors for the young girls or the teenagers. And then there are colors suitable for older women, such as ivory or off-white saris with a plain red border. ... Weavers here are making Dhakai saris these days in many different designs and colors. Those who love the traditional style "shawl" border will get that. Then there are the hajaar buti, shabnam, jui buti and many other beautiful saris with attractive names. And then Jamdani Dhakai is above everything. It is like the Queen among saris, commands respect from all others. If you are wearing one of these, then wear some heavy jewellery of the style of your granny's days. Never use a French perfume with it, use some delicate smelling aatar[4]. Every sari has its own personality, your other dressing accessories should be in tune with that. This is the Word about todays Fashion."[5]

Though translation loses lot of the effect of the poetic imageries used in the original, the excess of

poeticism is obvious. As one reads through it one gets the sense of a whirling world of vibrant colors and designs with infinite distinctions. Here are the many colored doore and choukhupi and there is the muga glowing in combination with silk. Here are the bright and delicate colors and there is the grave and dignified ivory with red border. Here are the variety of names of designs on Dhakai saris, there is the Jamdani with its royal beauty.

It is necessary here to discuss the meanings of the distinctions signified by the writing. The classifications often overlap or cut across each other. The names, Dhanekhali, Shantipuri, Begampuri, Tangail, all signify brands of handloom saris where the name brand is derived from the name of the village in which a particular group of weavers resided and practiced a style of weaving. Thus Dhanekhali is the name of saris that are woven by weavers living in the village Dhanekhali in Hooghly. Though the style of weaving has largely become standardized among all these different groups of weavers, the saris from these areas are still signified by separate names. Doore is a common pattern found on handwoven saris in Bengal where horizontal stripes of a color different from the color of the background are woven across the length of the sari. Choukhupi is another such pattern where instead of only horizontal stripes one finds horizontal and vertical stripes together, creating patterns of small squares on the

sari. Muga is a kind of unbleached golden silk that is often used in the border or sometimes on the body of the sari itself. The particular adjectives used to describe the presence of muga here are snigdho and shuchi, which I have glossed in English as cool and pure respectively. The adjective snigdho derives from the root noun sneho which in Bengali means a form of passionless affection and is generally considered a feminine attribute. Shuchi refers to the state of purity that is associated with religious rituals. It is the opposite of anything that is not ritually admissible, i.e., a-shuchi ("a" being the negative prefix here). In the use of these two adjectives, we find a reiteration of the themes of femininity and tradition (by qualifying a sari with a feminine emotional attribute, snigdho, and a ritual purity associated with tradition, shuchi). The entire text is liberally sprinkled with signs of Indian "art" and "aesthetic" derived from a discourse of tradition. Such as comparing the beauty of the border of a sari with the beauty of traditional Indian musical forms, raga-ragini. Then the comparison is further stretched to include the alaap, a component of Indian music. The image of royalty in its Indian style appears a couple of times (raggi, maharaggi) to further enhance the richness of the text.

Clearly the readership this text is aiming at is one that is conversant with the discourse of Indian art and

aesthetic, and recognizes its connection with Indian tradition. This knowledge is the symbolic capital that works at reproducing the distinction between the bhadralok and the ones that are not. A brief history of the formation of the bhadralok culture is contained in a forthcoming chapter.

Woven in this text, moreover, one can find scattered traces of culturally organized perceptions of women and their lives. The fashion literature uses these cultural images to merge them with images of various saris to create different images of women.

The "ivory colored red bordered sari" is for the "older woman" (bayoshka mahila). Who is she? How old is a bayoshka mahila? What are the physical signs that signify her? Is she the "granny" we were told about in the beginning of the narrative? Or is she younger than her? In her book Bengali Women, Roy[6] discerns primarily three stages or phases in a Bengali woman's life which she (the author) classifies as "childhood and adolescence", "marriage", "later years and old age". The classification is revealing of the difficulties involved in translating, by means of classification, indigenous perceptions of women in different stages of life. It is also very acute in its perception in marking the two extremes of women's lives by the watershed of marriage. Insightful anthropological works have been done on the symbolic meaning of marriage for the

"person" in Hindu culture and the change of substance that it involves for the woman.[7] Roy grapples with adequately conveying in an alien language this cultural perception of transformation in a woman and the woman's experience of her life within this discourse. My interest here is not in discussing Roy's treatment of the issue of Bengali women's experience but to use her description of the category of women in "later years". To quote Roy:"Having a child... changes the status of a woman in all classes of Indian society, including upper-class Bengal. Becoming a mother... is the attainment of the status a woman is born to achieve....She becomes a mother (ma) and continues to be one till she stops reproducing, at which stage she becomes the matron-mother (ginni-ma)."[8]

Is she our "older woman"? What is important for our fashion world is that this woman knows herself by sight, that is, they want to fit her image of herself with a distinctive kind of sari which they can then sell. Roy provides a vivid description of this woman as she is ideally perceived:

> She is between forty-five and fifty-five years of age, somewhat plump from years of childbearing...she wears a white sari with a red border and vermilion on her forehead, and the parting of her hair (the sign of marriage in Bengal) is equally red...her mouth, like her sari-border, is red from chewing betel-leaf and nut with lime...The red in hair, forehead, and the sari-border indicates her fortunate status in being married and not yet a widow...Her plump and somewhat loose body indicates the years of childbearing and prosperous living, as opposed to

> young women who are slim. She is no longer a woman who can be looked at with desire or pity, but she must be respected.[9]

Our "older woman" for whom fashion has produced the "ivory colored sari with a plain red border" is this woman. In Bengal, cultural classifications of women's life-stages revolve around her marriage and childbearing. Ideally traditionally, a woman is fulfilled, completes her social process of becoming, with bearing a child (preferably a son) after marriage. The above description vividly captures all the physical signs that signify this state- of-being in a woman. Fashion has here successfully merged both tradition and distinction. The sign of tradition is white sari with red border. fashion seizes upon it and plays upon it like a virtuoso by producing distinction after distinction within it (ivory and red, off-white and red, white with a blue tinge and red, pure white and red), thus reproducing itself in the name of "tradition". The traditional woman, the desperately sought Other of the Bengali male, also has the option of keeping up with fashion, of being modern, by buying the ivory and red border this year and the pure white and red the next.

The author of the feature has very ingenuously introduced this playoff between tradition and modernity in the beginning of her story in the form of the story of interaction between the granny and women of her daughters'

generation. Of course here the use of the figure of "granny" is strategic. The story is not being told by granny's daughter (in which case she would have been referred to as the mother) but by another person who is supposedly in her grandchildren's generation. But the author never brings herself/himself into the story, never introduces any real time into the story. Granny is a symbolic figure, symbolic of an image-time when Puja meant that women wore wide red bordered sari to go and pay respect to the image of the goddess. It is with reference to that time that we make our fashion of tradition.

Several other age-classifications of women have been used in the writing, such as toruni, kishori, prae-prourha, purna-prourha, which I have tried to gloss in English as young woman, teenager, middle aged and older respectively. The limitation of the gloss is evident, but the point to note here is the function this age-classification serves in making distinctions in the world of fashion. While the classifications do derive from the culture, we must avoid culturalizing the phenomenon to see its specific function in the writing. Women of all age and status are enthusiastic about debating handloom saris (or so we are told in the story) which implies that even though they still are connected with granny's age there is enough variation for each one to be interested in knowledge about

saris.

What is the meaning of the overflowing poeticism of the text? Can be understood as having been generated by the same tension in trying to combine tradition and fashion."Tradition" is a myth whose historical actuality has drained out of it and its meaning appropriated by the discourse of fashion. Fragmented pieces of tradition (red bordered sari, jamdani, Dhakai, "shawl" border, shabnam etc) are attributed with the meaning of fashion by way of poeticizing them. The strategy of producing distinction among otherwise meaningless pieces of tradition is to attribute them with poetic values derived from the vocabulary of tradition. Thus muga becomes simple and pure, resham is authentic, cotton combines with silk to produce alaap, jamdani becomes a queen.

Anandalok. Puja number 1981.

SARI IS FOREVER.

"Sari and its many kinds of ornamentations are centuries old. Saris in many designs were available even as early as threethousand years before Christ. There is proof that in those days Kalinga and Tamralipta in Bengal were the source of colorful and ornamented saris and other textiles. These beautiful textiles used to be exported to centers of civilization such as Egypt, Rome, Greece, Syria, Babylon. In the very earliest times beautifully colored and ornamented textiles used to be made in the plains of the

Ganges, in the Chola dynasty in the south, in the plains of the Krishna river. Gold, coral, pearls and other jewels were used to embroider saris and other fine textiles. Even Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata mention this."[10]

Another play on the same theme. History backs up tradition. Also, using History as a form of knowledge, a form of symbolic capital, serves to reproduce the bhadralok culture. Once again information is inseparable from the poetic adornment that gives meaning to it. Old is Gold.

Anandalok, Puja number 1985.

GRACEFUL IN SARI.

"Many have noticed a new version of handloom saris in the city. This is the phenomenon of making churidar-kurta out of many kinds of designed bordered or jalchuri doore or choukhupi Tangail or Dhanekhali saris. When I inquired why these are so popular with school and college going girls, I got the answer: we prefer wearing churidar-kurta when we have to take the public transport to go to school. Also everyone appreciates that we have retained the dignified beauty of the border and the aanchal in making the dress."[11]

In this text tradition is being produced as "useful" for modern times too, thus trying to build a bridge between the specialized knowledge of the aesthete and the practical knowledge of the woman-of-the-world (thereby marking the

distinction itself). In this story the allusion is to the crowded condition of Calcutta public transport which asks for a practical, no-hassles dress for school and college going girls. Churidar-kurta, a dress once confined only among the women of northern India, has rapidly become popular all over India as a fashionable indigenous dress, replacing Western dress, for young girls. Young girls often try to mark their distance from womanhood by discarding wearing sari. Often the reason offered is that sari, with its hanging aanchal and comparatively intricate process of wrapping, obstructs ones freedom of movement, especially when one is not functioning within the privacy of ones home but has to struggle with the jostling crowd in the city. This social distinction sought to be marked by dress-distinction also problematizes the indigenous notion of femininity. Until churidar-kurta (consisting of a long and loose-fitting knee-length shirt on top of a pajama) appeared on the scene to mark age and, more importantly, space distinction among women (the functioning space for the girl wearing churidar-kurta is the "outside" as opposed to the "home" which is the space for the sari-clad woman), a Bengali woman was always socially represented as wearing sari. Sari thus was the marker of femininity. The emergence of churidar-kurta has problematized the indigenous notion of femininity which is indicative of a change in the social functions of women. Fashion-writing on handloom sari

adroitly uses this sign of distinction (churidar-kurta) to produce a different meaning of handwoven sari. It can be transformed, keeping its "dignified beauty" intact, into usable dress for women whose activities cannot be readily subsumed under some traditional category. It should be noted that work-outside-home, which falls outside of the traditional categories of women's activities, is also being reinscribed into a feminized-space in this writing by attaching the "dignified beauty" of handweaving to it.

A necessary accessory with the sari is the blouse or choli. Variations in the styles of choli can add to or modify the meaning of a sari, bring it from out of fashion to in fashion. Hence:

"It has become very common to add a piece of the border of the sari on the sleeve of the blouse. There is no originality in it any longer. Then you may try to change the rhythm of the song but keeping the scale the same. Suppose you buy your dear old churipar Tangail or Dhanekhali for some morning or afternoon event. You will find a wealth of color-combination in this design: black and green, red and black, violet and white, blue and white, and many others. The blouse you can wear with this can be made by adding a narrow piping on the sleeve and the neck of the blouse with a piece of cloth the same color as the churipar." [12]

The primitive is not left out of this composition.

Read this:

"Women design the blouses accessory to their saris according to their own personality and taste....style of blouse or ornaments borrowed from the tribals or the choli of the village-girl from Rajasthan or Gujarat, all these things are now being worn by many sophisticated ladies in the city."[13]

The word sophisticated is used in this Bengali fashion-writing in its transliterated form. Once again, it is indicative of the history of the formation of the bhadralok culture which produced the modernist dichotomies of primitive/civilized, simple/sophisticated, traditional/modern, etc. The culture of fashion-writing on handwoven sari produces and is produced within this translated discourse of modernity. The "sophisticated" woman restores primitivism, in an act of marking her sophistication, only to distill the beauty out of it according to "their own personality and taste", leaving the rest of it out.

Anandalok, Puja number 1983.

PERSONALITY AND COLOR OF SARI.

"Women in many nations of the world have given up their national dress. If asked the reason for this they say: indigenous dresses are not practical for the hectic life we lead today. Is that correct? Is there any kind of work that women are not doing in modern day India? Women

are doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers, judges, administrators, police, pilots in air-planes, even Prime ministers, and they all wear saris. In villages, farms, tea-plantations, even inside the mines women laborers everywhere wear sari."[14]

Sari is tradition and sari is compatible with the modern work ethics. Fashion-writing here is also instituting a pan-Indian representation of femininity transcending the distinctions of social class (the Prime minister, doctors, engineers, tea-plantation workers and mine-worker women all wear sari, and are hence all equally Indian), and at the same time stressing the essence of femininity that can be maintained even while working at men's jobs. However, as soon as we have come to terms with the workability of saris we are reminded of the possibilities of fashion in saris.

"Are the sari-designers and weavers thinking about bringing varieties in saris? If we want to answer that we will have to go to all those shops where saris have lightened up the interiors the way seasonal flowers do...Even a few years back we could not have imagined how this abundance of color could have been created by combining only the seven colors from a rainbow.

For example, let us take the color dhupchaya (shadowy grey) which is a very popular color these days... but one can write a dictionary on the different shades and nuances

of this one color. Suppose the heavy Madrasi silk is in this color. But it is a darker shade. The salesman will tell you it is called elephant grey. Truly, it is magnificent in its combination with dark purple in its border. Chanderi saris are as light and transparent as breeze, and the grey on that reminds one of the frosty fog enveloping a mountain. The name pearl grey applied to this color on Murshidabad or Bangalore silk clearly speaks of its resemblance with the soothing shine of a pearl. And lastly, in Bengal or Orissa handloom saris this same color comes combined with a flame-red border, animating the sari with the mystery of the mutual consciousness of fire and ashes.

This is just one example of the various nuances of colors to be found in saris. It is as if saris are competing with the feminine moods. You will always find a sari to fit your mood or your age. But, yes, you will have to look for it, investing some time in it."[15]

Once again in this text we encounter a sprinkling of names intended to signify simultaneously the diversity and unity of meaning to be found in hanwoven saris in India. Madras, Murshidabad, Bangalore, Bengal, Orissa are names of different cultural regions in India that are being used to signify the cultural diversity one can embody by wearing handwoven saris from different parts of India, and thus reproduce this diversity. On the other hand, the author is

at the same time trying to make their aesthetic appeal accessible to the Bengali reader by describing some of the different variations of color to be found in these saris by positing an originary Bengali name for the color, dhupchaya. Elephant grey, pearl grey are all variations on the same theme. Thus the narration is simultaneously producing its readership as belonging to the Bengali bhadralok culture and establishing connection with a pan-Indian culture. Also, this rather lengthy quotation is revealing of the function of the poetic excess in the space of fashion. Colors and their nuances, matching or constrasting borders, everything works towards creating a new meaning, a new distinction in a sari.
The "feminine" is characterised by its shifting, finely nuanced moods, and the image of the sari is animated with that consciouness, made as varied and nuanced as the feminine mood.

Anandalok, Puja number 1980.

SARI IS THE GREATEST OF ALL.

"...in the world of fashion sari is beyond comparison. In the eyes of the foreigners the sari is a wonder, untouched by the hands of a tailor, a dress fit for a queen. No matter how many different kinds of fashions come and go, the Indian woman will forever want the sari. It can never be overthrown from its position....in no other dress does the feminine body blossom into such lovely beauty. An

experienced reporter once argued for the sari: Women wear sari because they are smart. Sari can be compared to the ideal, generous examiner, who gives passing grade to her who has nothing and high grades to those bodies that have a beautiful complexion and are in good shape."[15]

Very ingenuously argued. Cleverly pulls together all the different strands of tradition (sari), eternity (Indian women will forever want the sari), feminine beauty, fashion, modern aesthetic (shape of body). Whose voice is it? The woman wearing the sari? Though the author is a biological female the voice and the gaze is distinctly masculine. It is standing outside of the experience of the woman wearing the dress and describing it as "blossoming" into "lovely beauty". Speaking through the discourse of sari and fashion is thus the voice of the "man". Sari-fashion, with all its images of tradition, eternity, village, and the feminine is a masculine discourse. It produces a rather mysterious "body". Produces it through the eyes of an "examiner", albeit an "ideal" and "generous" one, that "passes" it even if it "has nothing" and "gives high grades" to those who are "in shape". As the examiner, waving his magic wand, the Sari, the fetishized representation of the masculine gaze, now hides and now reveals the "body". The power of masculinity has been projected onto the object to animate it into producing/examining the female "body".

Within the fashion discourse the Bengali woman's body thus is produced as fused with the sari. The female body has been problematic for a male discourse regardless of cultures, but its solution has varied depending on the culture. In Bengali culture (here I mean the middle class culture that grew up with colonialism. The pre-colonial masculine discourse probably was different) the man secured his knowledge/power over the female body by making the sari (worn in the style improvised in the mid nineteenth century) into its contours. The sari, as the gaze of the man, drapes the woman, and in its own "generous" style, "passes" it in the contest of beauty.

Anandalok, Puja number 1982.

SARI AND THE WOMAN.

"Behind this aristocratic grace (aabhijatyo) of Bengal handloom saris are the weavers, those who have woven the History, Geography, Poems and Folklores, Myths and Crafts of Bengal within the space of two ordinary wooden frames. See for yourself, those ancient temples on the border, or the creepers and leaves, flowers and fruits of the beautiful, green Bengal. Somewhere you find the billowing waves of riverine Bengal, somewhere the deep silence of her snowcapped mountain peaks. Then again you find the beautiful birds of Bengal, or her blue sky... I think each and every sari of Bengal handloom has a personality of its own, its expression takes into account the psychology

(manastatto) of the woman. On a moonlit night the lover-woman wears a dark blue nilambari. The same woman transforms herself in the morning by changing into a pure white and red bordered sari, with the parting of her hair equally red. Then she is the pure, devoted wife, not the lover. In the language of Rabindranath, then she has been transformed from the lover to the goddess.

...A woman's life comes to its fruition through stages. Each of these stages are reflected in different kinds of saris. Thus some saris captivate a virginal school-going girl, some a young girl newly in love, some a newly wedded bride. The sari that attracts an intellectual woman will not attract others. The smart city woman with her sarcastic wit will prefer something else."

Finally, here we find fashion mentioning the weavers directly. The weavers are those "who have woven the History, Geography, Poems and Folklore, Myths and Crafts of Bengal withing the space of two ordinary wooden frames". How exactly do they weave? Can we know a little bit more about what is between those two wooden frames? Such questions are irrelevant . The figure of the "weaver" has been represented as it fits fashion. The "weaver" contains within him the "History, Geography, Poems and Folklores, Myths and Crafts of Bengal" which he then reproduces within the "space of two ordinary wooden frames". There he is frozen, forever churning out his content. Then we are

hurriedly taken off to a tour of all the beauties of Bengal that he has created on the saris. That is where we will find our Bengal, our tradition, our essence, our nuanced feminine psyche. The weaver has been produced as the Artist. But not to speak or create for himself though. The educated-urban Bengali has already found him, written him as if writing "History, Geography, Art, Myths and Crafts" through his work. The text of handloom weaving, and of the Tangail weaver in that, is being written by this colonized-urbanized-Historicized Bengali mind as the story of the weaver as the artist/author writing the hi(story) of a lost-and-found-again "tradition" (aesthetically fused with femininity). A story within a story within a story. My telling of the story of the Bengali male telling the story of the weaver telling the story of the "tradition" of Bengal. The last story mentioned is already written within the discourse of "modernity" in Bengal. It is the master narrative that writes all the authors mentioned above, including myself.

What does the weaver have to say to all this? Can we hear him?

ENDNOTES:

1. sindur is a kind of red powder that married women in Bengal customarily use to make a dot in the middle of their forehead and in the parting of their hair. It is meant to symbolize her husband's good health and long life. Hence it is also the sign of being in a married state, as opposed to being a widow or unmarried.

2. aanchal is the loose part of the sari that hangs from the left shoulder on the back.

3. "Sari in Fashion" in Anandalok, Puja number 1984, page 187.

4. a kind of indigenous perfume. It is associated with an atmosphere of music and dance in a traditional context, in other words, with an indigenous sense of aesthetic.

5. ibid, page 194.

6. Roy, Manisha.
   1975 Bengali Women. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

7. Fruzzetti,L.
   1982 The Gift of a Virgin. Rutgers University Press. New Jersey.
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   1977 Kinship in Bengali Culture. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
   Ostor, A, L. Fruzzetti and S. Barnett (ed).
   1982 Concepts of Person: Kinship, Marriage and Caste in India. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.

8. Roy, Bengali Women, page 125.

9. ibid, page 126.

10. "Sari is Forever" in Anandalok, Puja number 1981, page 47.

11. "Graceful in Sari" in Anandalok, Puja number 1985, page 135.

12. Ibid, page 138.

13. Ibid, page 138.

14. "Personality and Color of Sari" in Anandalok, Puja number 1983, page 247.

15. Ibid, page 247.

16. "Sari is the Greatest of All" in Anandalok, Puja number 1980, page 256.

CHAPTER II

THE (HIS)STORY OF THE PRODUCTION OF THE SUBJECT.

The consumer-subject produces the commodity-object by deploying the cultural-historical distinctions that went into producing her "self". The commodity takes on the value of a sign as the consumer produces herself by projecting onto the object the historical signs constitutive of her. I shall be concerned here with the history that produced, the bhadramahila, the consumer-subject in our story.

The Emergence of the Bhadramahila

The bhadramahila emerged as a socially recognizable figure as a result of the tension that was generated among the Bengalis who were on the ascendant in the economic and social scene in Bengal starting from the eighteenth century. These people collaborated with the British, first as trading partners and then as professionals and administrators, as the British gradually needed to recruit more and more natives for their growing administrative apparatus. The British initially called these people the "educated natives".[1] It is this group of people that eventually came to call itself "bhadralok". The distinguishing mark here is the prefix bhadra, which can be glossed in English as "polite", "gentle" or "refined",

thereby clearly marking itself off from what it came to perceive as the "ordinary", or "unrefined". In the parlance of the bhadralok the "ordinary" people came to be known as the chotolok or the hoi polloi.[2]

The bhadralok as a social group thus was not defined solely by its dominant position in the economy of Bengal then, but was a group of people keen on marking themselves off by their deportment, their life-style. The other point of importance for our purpose is that the term is a gendered one: it is a masculine term, literally meaning only the menfolk of the group.[3] The figure of the bhadramahila, the female counterpart of the bhadralok, gradually started to take shape from the middle part of the nineteenth century,[4] when the male members of this group felt an increased tension between their "public" selves, as "educated" and "progressive" figures, and their "private" selves as members of their family and home. The indigenous oposition between the public and the private, which among the upper caste was largely coincident with an opposition between the masculine and the feminine, came under pressure as the "public" world of the male members started to change fundamentally. Though the bhadraloks were a mixed group of people in terms of their caste composition, social aspiration among this group was usually expressed by adopting upper caste customs, of which purdah was one.[5] It

is important,therefore, to know something more about the world of the bhadralok in order to comprehend fully how the bhadramahila came into existence in that world.

The formation of the cultural identity of the bhadralok in the nineteenth century can be best understood as an act of translation on the part of the Bengalis. The concept of translation is useful here since it captures the spirit with which the "educated" Bengali set himself to incorporate "modernity" into his world and also the problems he encountered therein. Any act of translation has to grapple with the relation between form and content of language, and constantly try to fit the content of the translator's language with the essence of the content of the original while translating the form. This problem becomes even more acute when the arena of translation is

society itself and not a text as commonly understood. For in this case any attempt to appropriate a foreign notion involves directly intervening in social relations, which are the contents of the social language. Specially in a colonial context translation often becomes one of the important means of resistance, for it is one way of appropriating the Other into oneself without entirely losing one's self.

As has already been mentioned, the bhadralok were a group of people who largely provided the army for running the enormous and proliferating British administration and

institutions, primarily in Calcutta and also in other parts of India. These people were educated in English language and had formal schooling in western forms of knowledge. Education was (and is) the hallmark of a bhadralok status. It is difficult to say anything definite about the composition of the bhadralok in terms of indigenous social categories like caste[6]. The population of Calcutta grew very rapidly between 1821 and 1837, by nearly 50,000 and the bulk of this population was formed by Bengali Hindus.[7] The upper and middle part of the social pyramid in Calcutta was occupied by these Hindus. There was another influx of Bengalis into Calcutta between 1860 and 1870[8]. These were a group of merchants and bankers who "built large houses, established family deities, patronized Brahmins and ghataks (match-makers),entertained European officers and friends as Mughal courtier would do, imitated the Europeans in architecture, furniture and, in the nineteenth century, in the consumption of tea, wine and soda water".[9] These people were known as abhijata (aristocratic) bhadraloks (as opposed to the grihastha or "domestic" ones)(5). The most important names among these are the Debs, Tagores, Mallicks etc. In fact, to this day, in the northern part of the city these names are associated with entire localities (such as the "Mallicks of Rajabajar" or "Tagores of Jorasanko") signifying their regional importance. All of these people had settled in Calcutta and came to call their house in

Calcutta as their bari (home) instead of basa (temporary residence, not-home).[10] Mukherjee argues that most of these people were of "humble origin, small traders, junior administrators and small landholders, who made money working as junior partners of the English officers and free merchants".[11]

The strata below the abhijata class consisted of "large shopkeepers, small traders, small landholders and white-collar workers in commercial houses and government offices, teachers, native doctors, journalists and writers".[12] These were the grihasthas who "had accepted the leadership of the abhijata" (MU :23. 8). Mukherjee, however, goes on to reject any idea of caste-position being an important criteria for belonging to the bhadralok class. " Those who could acquire enough wealth, English education, and high status through administrative service, belonged to this "new aristocracy", and since a large number of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas had administrative skill, and economic incentives, they formed the bulk of the bhadralok. The majority of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, poor and illiterate, were not considered as bhadraloks".[13]

There has been debates about whether this group of people can rightly be called a "class". Without entering into that debate, I shall use the term here as a sign that came to be constructed historically as a colonial situation tore apart the social fabric and produced certain new

oppositions in the culture. In this case, bhadralok signified "English education", "permanent settlement in the city", "connection with the British either as economic brokers or as white-collar workers".

These categories, however, were "lived" categories. How did the bhadralok appropriate these signs in their everyday life? What were the disjunctures opened up in having to "live" these signs? The lack of historical material on the subject obliges me to look for acts of translation in the ideological statements the bhadraloks were making those days, which have been adequately documented.[14] The fissures in the bhadralok consciousness, and their attempts to come to terms with it, can be read from some of the linguistic terms that came into existence at this time. "Bengal Renaissance" is one such term. Allegedly, Rammohun Roy, the initiator of the Brahmo movement in Bengal, first imagined the changes going on in the Bengali society in those days as comparable to the European Renaissance.[15] This idea of the "Bengal Renaissance" came to be a significant point of reference for the identity of the bhadralok. Having identified the present age as the age of "Renaissance", the bhadralok could then safely identify themselves with "modernity" and "civilization". Whatever in the present did not qualify for "modernity" could be relegated into the "past" by calling them "tradition". The construction of the Bengal

Renaissance was clearly a "historical" act, both in the sense of acting strategically in a historical context and in the sense of writing a "history". Discovery of an Aryan golden age, beginning of socio-religious reforms and linguistic and literary modernization were the three realms in which the Bengali identified a resurgence of his self(7). Identification of the period with the Renaissance was also an act of translation, for here a western concept of "history" was being translated into indigenous terms by periodizing indigenous history into the ancient golden ages, then the "dark medieval" ages and then finally into a resurgence or an age of "Renaissance". Without entering into the question of the validity of this classification, one can say that the act speaks of the predicament of the colonial mind.

The idea of a Renaissance also brought into prominence the issue of "inequality" of rights and liberties among the members of the society. The "woman" was one sign that came to signify "injustice". Rammohun Roy protested against the indigenous custom of sati (the burning alive of the widow on the husband's funeral pyre) and successfully banned its practice (in the late 1820s). Another reformer, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, argued for the remarriage of widows in 1855 in the teeth of conservative opposition by supporting his position on scriptural grounds. He was also strongly in favor of education of women and actively

engaged in organizing and working for schools for women.[16]

While Rammohun and Vidyasagar had taken up the cause of the "Hindu woman" in general, the concern with women became more focused on women of the bhadra-household by the late nineteenth century. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the first "novelist" in Bengali language writing in the late 1870s, introduced for the first time the idea of "social novel" (samajik upannyash) and wrote several novels in that genre. Though his novels were not ostensibly directed at the "women" question, we get the first depictions of women from bhadralok households in his novels. Mukherjee[17] points out how Indira, the heroine of one of his novels, was portrayed as someone from a rich bhadralok family who ends up as a domestic servant in another bhadralok household in Calcutta. To quote Mukherjee:"The mistress of the household is very distressed that she had unknowingly mistreated "a daughter of a good family". But the mistress had no regret for mistreating her Brahmin cook. Indira was a kayastha, but because she was from a bhadralok family her rank in society was far higher than that of a Brahmin cook."[18] This points to the fact that status of the bhadralok was not dependent upon the caste hierarchy. By the time Bankimchandra was writing the bhadralok had already established themselves as a group that cut across traditional caste-hierarchy. We also know from this that women from bhadralok household did not

ordinarily take up position as servants. However, nowhere does Bankimchandra refer to her as a bhadramahila. It is hard to identify a specific period when the women of bhadralok household came to be known as bhadramahilas. According to Borthwick(11), various terms like bhadrakulabala(girls of good family), bhadrabangsajabala (girls of good lineage) and madhyabittagrihastha kamini (middle-class housewives) were used in the formal literature on women that had started to come out at that time. Bhadramahila was only one among these terms which gradually came to represent "an ideal type, embodying a specific set of qualities and denoting a certain lifestyle".[17] At present times, none of the above mentioned terms, except bhadramahila, are in popular or formal use.

What is of interest to us regarding the form of reference to women of bhadralok household in Borthwick's study is that she found all of these terms in articles that came out in the Bamabodhini Patrika, a women's journal (by and for women) that started to come out in 1863 under the aegis of Keshabchandra Sen, one of the leaders of the Brahmo movement in Bengal. It was with the Brahmo movement that the question of "women's emancipation" in terms of "education" and coming out of the purdah and appearing in public gained momentum. The ostensive purpose of the Patrika was to provide a public forum for discussing the oughts and ought-nots of an ideal bhadra-woman. The fact

that the journal used various terms of references to designate their subject points to the other fact that the women of the bhadralok had not been part of a public discourse until then. It was with the gradual inclusion of the "feminine" (of a particular class) in a public discourse that bhadramahila emerged as a generally-agreed-upon term and also as a social body that "embodied" certain qualities.

THE WOMEN OF BHADRALOK HOUSEHOLD BEFORE THE EMERGENCE OF THE BHADRAMAHILA

Though it is difficult to identify a "typical" bhadralok household in nineteenth century Calcutta certain general features of household organization provides some idea of the cultural conceptualization of women in the period prior to the discourse of the bhadramahila.

A bhadralok house would be divided into two sections, the andarmahal or antahpur (the inner section) and the bahirmahal (the outer section) that corresponded with the feminine domain and the masculine domain respectively. While the men had access to the andarmahal the bahirmahal was strictly taboo to women. As the women never came into contact with anyone except their female relatives, domestic servants and some socially sanctioned male relatives, the terms of reference for women indicated only her position within the family-network. The ginni was the oldest female in the house, the wife of the karta (the master)the one who

was responsible for running the household, i.e.,"looked after the household stores, made arrangements for meals, and supervised the behaviour of the family members."[20] The other female members of a typical joint family household would be her "prepubertal unmarried daughters, her daughters-in-law, younger granddaughters, and often one or two widowed aunt or sister."[21] The daughters-in-law were generally referred to as bou, meaning a bride. The difference between the terms ginni and bou is one of status: while the ginni had acquired her position of importance after years of apprenticeship as a bou under her elders, the present bous are similarly expected to carry out the daily duties of running the sangsar (household) under her supervision until she was rendered unable to carry the burden. The women all participated in carrying out the household chores though there would often be inequity in the distribution of workload causing an undercurrent of tension among them. The women usually addressed each other by their first name if they happened to be of the same age and status, but in situations of difference of status kinship terms would be used. Thus, if a woman's sister-in-law happened to be older than her she would address her as thakurjhee(daughter of the master). Sometimes even an younger woman would be addressed by her kinship name if in a large household it was necessary to distinguish her from others in the same category. For

example, if there were several brothers in a joint family then their respective bous would usually be referred to as boro bou(first bride), mejo bou(second bride), sejo bou(third bride), choto bou(youngest bride). The lives of the women revolved entirely around the works and duties associated with the proper running of the sangsar. Borthwick provides a detailed account of the daily life of a bou in a household:

> The young bou would be taught to perform the domestic tasks and religious rituals that constituted the daily routine of the antahpur. The sacred and the mundane were intertwined in her life, giving it greater significance than purely routine housework would have done. The day began with sweeping the floors and washing utensils. Then she would bathe and carry out the morning's religious duties. Next came cooking --- a communal activity participated in by all the women in the house. Older women served the meal to the men of the house. Women ate afterwards, and would then wash at the tank. The main period of leisure was the afternoon. In the evening the bou performed the worship of the family deity again, and then cooked the last meal of the day. Apart from this routine, there were children to attend and sick patients to care for.[22]

This account of Borthwick is evidently of a household that is not well-off enough to have enough servants to do the housework for the women. Actually the amount of housework women had to do by themselves varied with the family's economic position. However, no matter what the economic position of the family was, women were not allowed outside of the antahpur. If they needed to go out they needed the protection of a closed palanquin (palki). Even an

auspicious rite like taking a bath in the Ganges to purify oneself had to be done from inside of a palanquin. The bearers would lower the closed palanquin into the water in order to ensure complete invisibility of the woman inside.[89]

The centrality of the house and the sangsar in a woman's life, as is clearly brought out by Borthwick's account, is also socially acknowledged and legitimized by describing women as belonging to the ghor, which is the indigenous term for a house. A bou is often referred to as ghorer bou (bride of the house), specially when one tries to rhetorically vindicate the duties and obligations of a married woman. Though the term ghor literally means a house or a room, it is often used in conjunction with sangsar and then the composite term ghor-sangsar is used to refer to life and duties in the context of a family as a microcosm of the World. In that sense, a married woman performing her duties in the context of her household is in a wider sense performing her rightfully proper duties in the World. The ideal life a woman can live thus is as a married woman performing all her household tasks dutifully.

THE ISSUE OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRAHMO MOVEMENT.

The Brahmo movement in Bengal grew out of the tension between an Orientalist position, that perceived an authentic Hindu past as a glorious phase in the history of

Bengal/India and conceptualized social reform as updating traditional customs by fusing them with some modern western values, and the position of that of a Westernizer, that treated any Indian tradition as dead and equated a complete assimilation with western modes of life with "modernization". As I have already discussed,Rammohun Roy was the man who first conceptualized the Brahmo ideal by articulating a glorious Vedic past with a modern "Renaissance" in Bengal. He advocated for India a monotheistic religion that he argued was derived from pure Vedic traditions and regarded as "Hindoo idolatry" all its present customs of "innumerable gods, goddesses and temples".[24] In 1828 Rammohun, with some of his supporters (such as Debendranath Tagore of the famous Tagore family) founded the Brahmo Sabha, which was later renamed as the Brahmo Samaj. The group was founded primarily on Roy's idea of a golden Vedic age and its purificatory possibilities for contemporary Bengali society.

The schism that Rammohun Roy opened up, both epistemologically and socially, through his ideas of a universal-Hindu religion in the form of Brahmoism, and which later led to a split in the Brahmo Samaj, was that the "dark ages" of Hindoo idolatry was the "present" in Bengal. European historiography had constructed its "Renaissance" with hindsight, its "dark medieval ages" were already a "past" in relation to its Renaissance. Rammohun

was trying to construct a "history" of Bengal which either left out millons of practicing "Hindoo idolators" or convert them into believers in monotheism according to his conceptualizations of a historical past and present. He came under fire from his compatriots like Radhakanta Deb who, though western educated and fully conversant with the Orientalist view of a golden Aryan history, nevertheless regarded present day customs of Hinduism (inclusive of the practice of sati) as an integral part of an Oriental culture. Radhakanta's position was not that of a translator but that of a collector. According to Kopf,"he (Radhakanta) saw no conflict between indigenous and Western learning and sought to integrate both into the Calcutta school system....Radhakanta and his Bengali peers would never have participated in a program that they felt was aimed at the destruction of their own civilization".[85] Radhakanta had a long and interesting career as a member of the Hindu College, at that time the only European style institution of higher learning in India. He also wrote and published the Bangla siksa-grantha (1821), translated as A Bengali Spelling Book. According to Kopf,"it is notable for its harmonious combination of indigenous and nonindigenous knowledge without the slightest hint of contradiction or stress between the two".[86] He wrote another book by the name of Stri-sikhar bidya (Female Education). In this book he supported the idea that girls be instructed in domestic

skills at home.[27] Probably the idea behind it was to improve the quality of domestic life by adding some scientific knowledge about housework to the women's traditional store of knowledge.

History of Bengal in the nineteenth century is a story of such conflicting positions. The nature of the conflicts was rooted in the problems of translating the concepts of western "modernity" in indigenous social language. Could one support the practice of sati and still be "modern"? Not if one has translated "modernity" as a stage in a linear history and had to relegate the social "present" into the "past" in order to institute modernity there (as Rammohun did). Yes, if "modernity" meant isolated western practices associated with certain values that could be added on to the present social system and thus improve the quality of social life as a whole (as it meant to Radhakanta Deb).

The same conflict can be perceived in the debates among the "modernizers" on the issue of "emancipation of women". Western liberalism urged active assistance and help towards the downtrodden, however they may be perceived. The Bengali "modernizers" chose the "woman" as their object of rescue.[28] As I have already mentioned, Rammohun Roy took up the women's cause in taking an active part in banning the practice of sati[29] and Vidyasagar fought for remarriage of widows and helped in promoting

education among women. Though both banning of the sati and remarriage of widows triggered off intense opposition from the non-Brahmos, the level on which these debates took place never questioned the center of the cultural perception of women, that of as ghorer bou (bride of the house). It was the question of "education" that hit the core of the "problem". For the Brahmos, "education" was integrally linked with the question of "emancipation of women". Clearly "emancipation" presupposed a prior state of "imprisonment". For the bhadralok, especially the ones inclined towards Brahmo ideals, imprisonment of women was made meaningful in the context of their aspiration for "modernization" which was identified with "civilization". James MIll in his History of British India pointedly stated:"The condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manners of nations. Among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted."[30] He further observed that "a state of dependence more strict or humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot easily be conceived".[31] Along with sati and polygamy, "imprisonment" was perceived in the system of purdah and lack of "education" for women.

This reading of the social text as a lack, as a negation of civilization, exposed one of the most important structuring oppositions in the culture, that of

female:male::inside:outside.

In our discussion of women's life we have seen the segregation of the andarmahal and the bahirmahal was what structured male and female activity. We have further seen how the centrality of the image of the "inside", the ghor, was used to refer to women (ghorer bou). When the system of purdah came to be questioned it required a reconceptualization of the cultural ideal of a "woman". How does one imagine a woman out of the ghor and still retain the cultural opposition inside/outside?

In the matter of education, "traditionalists" like Radhakanta Deb proposed women's "education" inside the house and in matters pertaining to the domestics. In his book, he argued that an educated woman would have the advantage of being able to correspond with her husband, to instruct her children, and to do household accounts. She would raise healthier children because she would have some knowledge of hygiene. In short, an educated wife would make a better housewife.[32]

Clearly this position was giving a wide barth to the issue of "emancipation" in the sense of coming out from behind the purdah. Characteristically, his proposal was to "improve" upon the existing structure, but not disrupt it.

Initially, many bhadralok took to educating their women within the house, mostly by European ladies. It is not quite clear how the idea of a public school for girl's

took shape, but the distinction of being the first school for the bhadralok-women in Bengal went to the Barasat Girls' School, established in 1847. A relatively more successful effort was the establishment of the Bethune School in 1849. Education at the school was "emphatically secular"[33], but purdah could not be maintained because male pundits did the teaching.[34] Even in this school too, enrollment was not encouraging in the beginning. Borthwick[35] provides the estimate that of the 76 pupils at Bethune School at that time, 51 were from the small landholders, higher professional and lower professional groups.

"Education" was problematic in the light of its relation to marriage. Many were concerned how an "educated" woman would behave herself within the household. Would she be as observant of the rules of propriety inside the ghor as her uneducated sisters? The answer to this problematization of "education" in relation to the ghor has to be seen in the context of a Hindu perception of gender and person. Ostor and Fruzetti[36] have shown how the concept of a "person" in Bengal is a complicated social construction that is carried out by means of exchange of women (marriage). Though Ostor and Fruzetti are talking here in the style of an ideal-typical construction, the general point they make is significant. A "person" is known within the discourse of "relatives" (attiya kutum or attiya

sajan): interpersonal social actions are geared towards producing and reproducing this discourse by including or excluding people from it. Marriage alliances are one of the most important social strategies by which to mark people as a "person" in relation to ones own group of attiya sajan. "To conclude a marriage the bangsas of the bride and groom have to be matched. The units linked by marriage are kulas, bangsas, ghars, and paribars (the line encompassing locality)".[37] Ghor (or ghar, as the authors spell it) is one of the important constitutive links in the construction of a "person". Since the bou is expressly associated with the ghor by being marked as ghorer bou, her "personhood" (and of those related to her) is crucially dependent upon her reproducing the idea of it through her activities related to it. "Education" in western style threatened precisely this person-producing-discourse in the form of housework.

The matter became even more complicated when "education" had to be combined with women's coming out of the purdah.The observance of purdah among Bengalis was by and large an upper class phenomenon and its practice was seen as a sign of upward mobility.[38] These upper class Bengali men, as office-holders in British administration, were often posted outside of Bengal or far from tha place of their home on account of their jobs. Though it was only in rare cases the bhadraloks actually took their wives to

live with them in their place of work, the wives often visited their husbands for short periods. Whichever was the case, the situation required for women of bhadralok households to travel by rail. The British government was not greatly enthusiastic about making special arrangements for the observance of Purdah while people were travelling, primarily to avoid incurring an expense they perceived as unnecessary. Though many cases were reported of women being harassed in train carriages[39] , no special measures were taken to ensure the invisibility of purdah in trains.

However, the bhadralok women who did undertake such travels despite the dangers, were exposed to a world quite different from the feminine world in Bengal. Two Brahmo women, Saudamini Mozoomdar and Mahamaya Basu, visited northwest and western India and recorded their impressions for the Bamabodhini Patrika.[40] This Brahmo supported women's journal thus made it possible for Bengali women (i.e., the literate and interested ones among them) to know about the ways of life of women in other parts of India, specially women whom they considered of the same status as themselves (bhadramahilas in Calcutta had already been exposed to women from other parts of India, but they mostly belonged to the class of chotoloks in the context of the city. More about this later).

The prospect of travel and appearance in public made one reform absolutely essential: the reform of Bengali

women's dress. "An upper caste woman would habitually wear a sari of fine transparent muslin. It was a single piece of cloth, draped around the body. No undergarments were worn."[41] That Bengali women were not "decently" dressed had already been voiced by Britisher's like Bethune and Annette Akroyd and was taken over by "progressive" Brahmos like Shib Chunder Bose and converted Christians like Reverend Krishna Mohun Banerjea.[42] Again, we find the Bamabodhini Patrika providing the forum for discussion of this matter among Brahmo women. As Borthwick reports, some of the women themselves were of the opinion that customary clothing was not suited for "polite society". One woman put forward the view that ideal "dress" for Bengali bhadralok women had to avoid "denationalization" on one hand and being mistaken for prostitutes on another.[43] Since prostitutes wore shoes and jackets, bhadramahilas should mark themselves off from them by wearing an additional chador or wrapper covering her body. Jnanadanandini Debi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, who was the eldest son of Debendranath Tagore, one of the founders of the Brahmo Samaj, was probably the bhadramahila who popularized among Brahmo women a style of wearing sari which she improvised from the Parsi women's style of wearing sari (she was one of those few women who had accompanied her husband to western India on his being posted there). She even wrote an article in the Bamabodhini Patrika with a description of the kind of "dress" that she

wanted to popularize. For herself, "she wore shoes, stockings, bodice (angiya kacali), blouse (jama) and a short skirt (ghaghara) or ijar with a sari over the top at home, and a cadar covering her head in addition when she went out."[44] The style she invented came to be known as Brahmika sari. But since this style did not allow women to cover the top of their head (the indigenous sign for showing respect for elders and protecting ones modesty in front of strangers), some women took to wearing a small hat from which hung a piece of cloth. According to Chitra Deb, the present day style of wearing sari among women was finally introduced by Sucharu Debi, the daughter of Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen and the wife of the Prince of Mayurbhanja.[45]

The above account is a very sketchy history of some of the complicated isssues that engaged the nineteenth century Brahmo "modernizers". I have not made any effort to duplicate the work already done by able historians on the formation of the Brahmo movement and the question of "emancipation of woman" as it was debated and solutions offered in the context of the ideology of the movement. My purpose in recounting some aspects of that very complicated period in history was to be able to see the bhadramahila of today as she came to be constituted within a history. She is a sign of "modernity", or a translated version of "emancipation", constituted of oppositions such as

modernity/tradition, education/illeteracy, home/world, inside/outside, urban/rural, Bengali/non-Bengali. We shall find these historical oppositions being deployed by the bhadramahilas as they engage in producing the object, Tangail sari, as a meaning.

The problem I faced in telling the history of the bhadramahila was that it indeed is a (his)story. That is, the authentic voice of the feminine cannot be found in the discourse that was generated around the issue of "emancipation of women". Borthwick makes an attempt to present the women's voice by digging into the literature of the women's journals of the time. The voices heard in these journals, however, are already marked by the masculine discourse in that it is the voice of the "educated" women who have situated themselves in the already defined arena of "modernity". The subjectivity of the bhadramahila is foreclosed within a discourse that identifies her as such. The story of the consumer-subject I am about to tell, therefore, is after all the story of a subjectified-object.

ENDNOTES:

1. Mukherjee,S.N.
1976 "Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature: An Essay on the Language of Class and Status" in Bengal Past and Present, vol xcv, part II, # 181, page 227.

2. Borthwick,M.
1984 The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905. Princeton University Press. Princeton, page 4.

3. Although Mukherjee in his "Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature" says that "lok stands for person or persons", more accurately lok means a man or a male-person.

4. I have largely followed Borthwick in periodizing "women's emancipation" in the history of Bengal.

5. Borthwick, M.
1984 The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, page 228.

6. I am here following the historical study done by S.N. Banerjee of the political dynamics of the bhadralok community in Calcutta in the early parts of the nineteenth century. He argues: " ... in contrast to caste, the bhadralok was an open de facto social group. Although the bhadralok was almost exclusively a Hindu group, caste had no part in the selection;
men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living and received a similar education were considered as bhadralok.... Those who could acquire enough wealth, English education, and high status through administrative service, belonged to this "new aristocracy", and since a large number of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas had administrative skill, and economic incentives, they formed the bulk of the bhadralok. The majority of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, poor and illiterate, were not considered as bhadraloks."
In another important historical study done on the bhadraloks by J. H. Broomfield (Broomfield, 1968. Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal. University of California Press, Berkeley) we find: "Education itself became the hallmark of bhadralok status. Not every individual who considered himself a bhadralok could obtain an education. Not every bhadralok family could afford the education it desired for its sons. But the idea was generally accepted"... This points to another characteristic of the group: membership was not wholly ascriptive. For a low-caste Hindu or for a Muslim it was difficult to enter the charmed circle of the respectable, but it was not impossible and education was the means." (Broomfield: 8-9)
Broomfield maintains that because of the strong emphasis on an English education for acquiring a bhadralok status, the group was dominated by higher castes who were generally financially more well-off and could afford the costs of education. He provides us with a table of the percentage of different castes among the

literate in Bengal in 1901 where we find Baidyas occupying the highest position (64.8% of the total number of literates) with Brahmins following in on a close second (63.9%), Kayasthas on a third (56.0%) and Muslims coming in the last position (6.8%). (Broomfield: 9)

In another table the same author provides us the information that, at the same period, 80.2% of high government appointments went to the three high castes, Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas while these three castes taken together constituted only 5.2% of the entire population at that time.

Broomfield goes on to characterise the "Bengal bhadralok at the beginning of the twentieth century" as "a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste proscriptions and its command of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably ready to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities." (Broomfield: 12-13)

Broomfield characterises the bhadralok as an "open status group, for entry was possible through education as well as birth". (Broomfield: 14). He, however, makes it a point to note that though ideologically the bhadraloks were an open status group, in practice there were serious difficulties in the path of aspiring entrants.

Another important historical study of Calcutta by P.K.Sinha (Sinha, 1978. Calcutta in Urban History. Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta) provides a historical account of the regional and caste origin of the "Fortune-makers and Family-founders" of Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. In his account we find a mixed list of caste names (such as Sett, Basak, Deb, Mitra, Mallik, Datta, Shil, Dhar, Laha, Ghosal, Tagore) which include Baidyas, Kayasthas and Subarnabaniks. Sinha is more interested in the early development of Calcutta as a city and not in the question of the caste composition of the bhadralok per se. But his account does leave one with the sense that historically the bhadralok culture in Calcutta was not founded solely by high castes, even though later some high caste life-styles may have been adopted by some to further legitimise their social status.

If we come back to Mukherjee's study, he strongly contradicts Broomfield on the ground that "... since a large number of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas had

administrative skill, and economic incentives, they formed the bulk of the bhadralok. The majority of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, poor and illiterate, were not considered as bhadralok. According to Ward three-quarters of the total number of Brahmins in Calcutta and the Twenty-Four Parganas were domestics." (Mukherjee: 31-32).

My statement that "it is difficult to say anything definite about the composition of the bhadralok in terms of indigenous social categories like caste" was an attempt to reconcile these two views. However, given that the data Broomfield used to support his view only tells us what percentage of the bhadralok were from the high castes but not what percentage of the high castes fell outside of this group, I tend to find Mukherjee's claim that the "bhadralok was an open de facto social group" more convincing. Mukherjee also provides us with a table of the "Principal Hindu Inhabitants of Calcutta" that was compiled by the Foreign Department in 1839 that gives us a picture of a very mixed caste composition (Mukherjee:18-19).

From my fieldwork experience I would claim that while it is a fact that anyone belonging to the bhadralok group also belongs to some caste group (as is true of the author herself) and in that sense bhadraloks can be studied as a group composed of castes, the conscious social ideology that binds the group together is not that of caste but education and a style of living.

7. Mukherjee, S.N. 1977. Calcutta, Myths and History. Subarnarekha, Calcutta, page 6-7.

8. Again, I am following Banerjee's description of the process of formation of the bhadralok culture in Calcutta. See Banerjee, page 16.

9. Ibid, page 16.

10. Ibid, page 16.

11. Ibid, page 20.

12. Ibid, page 22.

13. Ibid, page 31.

14. This respective silence and excess of historiographical work on every-day-life and public ideological debate is indicative of the production of a History within the genre of social history.

15. Kopf,D. 1979. British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance. University of California Press, Berkeley, page 3.

16. Sarkar, Susobhan. 1985. On the Bengal Renaissance. Papyrus, Calcutta, page 35.

17. Mukherjee, "Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature", page 231.

18. Ibid, page 231.

19. Borthwick "The Changing Role of Women in Bengal", page 54.

20. Ibid, page 10.

21. Ibid, page 11.

22. Ibid, page 13.

23. Ibid, page 6.

24. Kopf,D. British Orientalism and Bengal Renaissance, page 200.

25. Ibid, page 195.

26. Ibid, page 195.

27. Ibid, page 195.

28. Nandy has done a very provocative analysis of the place for the mother in the Indian Hindu male psychology and tried to understand Rammohun Roy's actions in terms of his psychic conflicts.

29. See Lata Mani's work on Sati.

30. Mill, James. 1840. History of British India. London, 4th edition, vol I, page 440-447.

31. Ibid, page 440-447.

32. Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, page 63-64.

33. Ibid, page 75.

34. Ibid, page 75

35. Ibid, page 76.

36. Ostor,A and Fruzetti,L.
1982 "The Cultural Construction of The Person" in Concepts of Person: Kinship, Caste and Marriage in India. (ed) Ostor, Fruzetti and Barnett. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

37. Ibid, page 19.

38. Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, page 228.

39. Ibid, page 234.

40. Ibid, page 235.

41. Ibid, page 244.

42. Ibid, page 245.

43. Ibid, page 247.

44. Ibid, page 248.

45. Deb, Chitra.1985. Thakur Barir Andarmahal. Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, page 33.

CHAPTER III

SIX TANGAIL SARIS IN SEARCH OF READERS

Advertising Tangail Saris

"TANTUJA: CLOTHING FROM BENGAL HANDLOOM"

Cotton and Silk Saris
Tangail, Shantipuri, Baluchari, Jamdani and printed saris, dhotis, polyester blend suiting shirting, dress material, readymade garments and textile for home-decoration.

Thus runs an advertisement for handloom sari put up by Tantuja, the state government owned body for organizing the sale of handloom products. The point to note in this particular piece of writing is the style of juxtaposition , as a means of classification, of the different kinds of commodities on sale. After being classified into cotton and silk, the saris are further classified into Tangail, Shantipuri, Baluchari, Jamdani and printed saris. They are thus divided into "types", with presumably different characteristics being used to mark them. I shall restrict my attention to one of the types: "Tangail sari", as it is discursively produced in the market as a sign within a system of signs.

Handloom sari-shops are a conspicuous feature in all major shopping centers in Calcutta. Some shops specialize only in handloom saris while others sell both handwoven and

other varieties such as mill-produced printed saris. Aside from established shops , handloom saris can be bought from sidewalk sales and also from women who run a small business of selling saris from their homes. As one walks down Rashbehari avenue, the major thoroughfare in south Calcutta that runs through Gariahat market, one of the city's oldest and largest shopping centers, one finds innumerable sari-shops on both sides of the street with signboards proclaiming in different styles the variety and/or quality of their stock. The names of the shops are an interesting mixture of English and Bengali. To give example of but a few: "The Basanalaya","Jaya Stores: Saree Specialists","The Benarasi Palace", "Sadhana Silk House: Benarasi,Silk, Tangail" etc. In most of the cases the Bengali is written in a transliterated form, especially in the older shops. The newer ones, that is the ones that have come up in the last ten to five years with the boom in the sari market following a spectacular rise in the demand for handloom saris, sport more "indigenous" names. Examples of some of the newer names are : Shyamali, Damayanti,Indrani. The last two names are names of female characters in Indian mythologies and all the three are popular names for women in middle class Bengali culture.

At this point it is necessary to throw some light upon the relation between class and style of names in Bengali culture.

Bengali names, both male and female, underwent a marked change with the beginning of the discourse of "modernity" in Bengal. Until then,names would always be in some way related to one of the innumerable gods in the Hindu pantheon and masculinity or femininity in a name would usually be denoted by adding a gender-suffix to it.

> Most high castes tended to have Sanskritized first names. Low castes tended to adopt Vaisnava first names, for example Govardhan, Hariballabh and so on. Many Kayasthas and other upper castes had Sakta style names, such as Kaliprasad, Kashinath, Gouri Sankar and so on. It is also interesting to note that rich but ritually low caste, such as the Subarnavaniks, had Vaisnava names.[1]

Along with Bengal "Renaissance"[2] and the emergence of the first "novelists" in Bengali language, especially Rabindranath Thakur and Saratchandra Chatterjee, a range of new secular names became household names in Bengal. These names were the names of the principal characters in these novels. As the novels became a symbol of "Culture" for Bengalis, one way of appropriating Culture for oneself and ones family was to name ones children after the name of these characters in the novels (some of which have by now become cultural stereotypes among Bengalis). Thus, with the gap of a generation, these names became a marker of "Culture" (in the sense of education and sophistication) among Bengalis. One can find demographic evidence of it in the fact that there is a mixture of secular/modern names and religious/pre-modern names among people in their 40s

and 50s, indicating the distance of their parents from the then newly emerging Bengali "Culture", while pre-modern names are almost nonexistent among people in their 20s and 30s. By this time, "modernity" has established its rule in Bengal, and what was avant-garde at one time has become popular.

"Bengal renaissance" was not only a period of appropriating "modernity" by translating western cultural forms into the indigenous language (such as upannyash for novels) , thereby evolving new cultural activities and a new language, it was also a period of resurrecting "tradition" in the Orientalist mode. One form it took, among many, was a new awareness and appreciation of Indian mythology. In this case, too, this "symbolic capital" was socially expressed by naming children after mythological characters. This is different from the pre-modern days when no conscious connection and self-identification was made between the names and "our tradition", "our mythology". This way, along with "secular" names, "traditional" names also came to contribute to the stock of names in "modern" Bengali Culture. Tradition was no longer a lived experience (in which case there is no need to signify it as "tradition"), but a signified with many different signifiers. Alongside "tradition" becoming a sign within a system of signs, the organization of social relations and perceptions were also changing. Knowledge about "tradition"

rapidly became institutionalized, in the form of mandatory texts in western style schools, musical and other types of aesthetic performances to be learnt at specialized institutions, publication of books intended for a special group of urbanized literate readership. The symbolic capital that these institutions functioned on and generated came to control the social representation of hierarchy in Bengali culture. I call the class that came to be formed through its access to this knowledge and thereby a familiarity with a style that represented this knowledge the dominant class.

Along with many other signs, name thus became an important sign of symbolic capital. Class distinction in Bengali society can be read off from the names that people and things sport. The names of the older shops signify their history, that they came into existence when there was no association between saris and the symbolic capital of the dominating class that came into existence with "modernity". The newer shops, sporting the "traditional" names, tell the story of the gradual appropriation of the sign of saris by this class. I shall go on to describe now some of the processes involved in the production of one of these signs.

The Selling of Tangail Saris

The proper name Tangail refers to a district in what

is now Bangladesh. Following two major political upheavals in the subcontinent (partitioning of India in 1947 and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent Islamic nation in 1971),the Hindu weavers who lived in that region migrated to India and settled in West Bengal. In the context of the sari-world in the city of Calcutta, the name functions as a sign, the signified being saris woven on handlooms by weavers who are originally from Tangail and possess the special traditional skill in weaving that goes into producing a "Tangail sari". The signified object, the sari, thus re-presents in a fetishised form a complex history of human activity. "Tangail sari" here is a language object, a myth. It is being used to objectify and thereby commoditize a history.

Let us follow one of these objects as it leaves its site of production and, passing through various intermediaries, finally stands in front of the gaze of the singular consumer.

Gobinda Basak had migrated to India from Tangail in 1970 and settled in this village Fulia (the husband of his maternal aunt had left Tangail in 1948 and was already in Fulia. So his family came straight to Fulia after they left Bangladesh). He works under a mahajan[*]. The general system is that the mahajan advances him some yarn for weaving a stipulated amount of saris and then pays him piece-rate on

the number of saris he weaves in a week. He is also in the process of buying his loom on hire-purchase from his mahajan.

At this moment, he has just completed his quota of saris for the week. He has finished weaving five of them. Usually he weaves three and a half to four saris a week, but this is the peak season. The pujas are only a couple of months away, and the mahajan is constantly after him, and other weavers like him, to increase production. His mahajan supplies to one of the most prestigious sari-shops in Calcutta, the one on Russel Street. This year they have given him some ultra-new design to weave on unbleached silk saris. His mahajan has given him some yarn in advance to weave that design. There are several others who are weaving the same design. Gobinda has the suspicion that his mahajan, Binoy Basak, is not entirely loyal to this special customer. That is, he sells this special design to other parties. But of course Gobinda has no proof of that. He has only heard some such gossip from his cousin, who also works under the same person. But his cousin is a clever one. He is always very well-informed of all the wheeling and dealing that goes on in this business and often makes his own couple of bucks out of it.

[Table I provides a schematic representation of the different levels of institutions through which handwoven saris are produced, sold and bought. It is directly

produced at the level of the small weaver, who then supplies it either to the middle weaver or directly to the mahajan. The mahajan then has the responsibility of selling the saris to the city buyers. He either sells it through some wholesaler in the city or directly to some retail customer. But bulk of the commodity is sold through wholesalers.

There are, however, leaks in this system. Though all saris are supposed to come to the mahajans directly, some saris always escape through the net and end up on the city retail market directly from the small weaver or the middle weaver.

Figure I provides a graphic description of the linkages between the different institutions described in Table I. The arrows indicate the directions in which cash or yarn or saris flow among these various parties involved. To describe the figure in verbal terms: The mahajan supplies cash or yarn to the middle weaver or directly to the small weaver. If the advance is made to the small weaver, he then advances it to the small weaver. The small weaver is then responsible for supplying the woven saris either to the middle weaver or to the mahajan. As mentioned above, the leaks in the transactions are indicated through arrows.]

THE STAGES OF TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN THE VILLAGE AND THE CITY MARKET:
The Institutions

VILLAGE	CITY
(1) Mahajan: The biggest holder of capital in the village and wholesale supplier to the city	(1) Wholesale Buyer
(2) Middle Weaver: Smaller holder of capital with a few weavers working under him. Supplies to the mahajan or to city retail	(2) Retail Buyer
(3) Small Weaver: No capital. Works with advance either from mahajan or middle weaver. Supplies directly to whoever makes the advance. May sell to city retail	

TABLE I

THE NETWORK OF EXCHANGE AMONG THE INSTITUTIONS

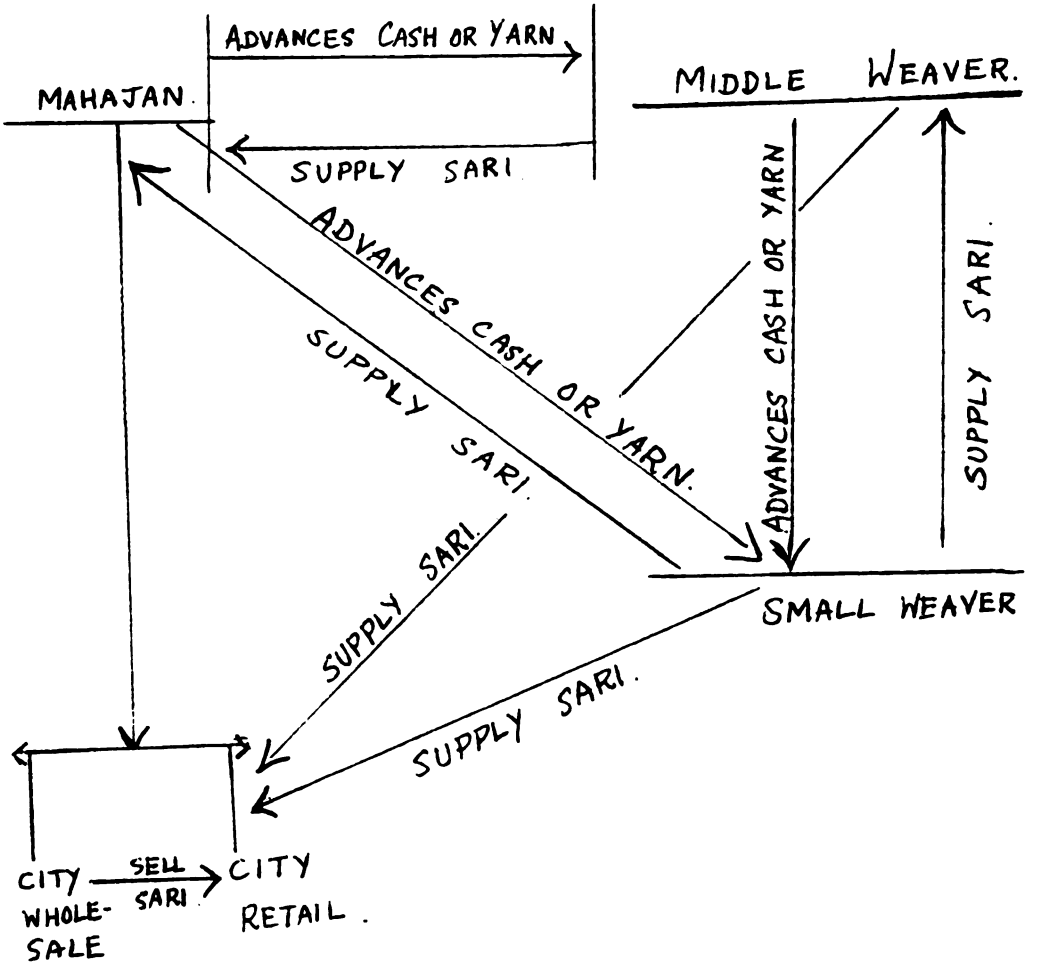


FIGURE I

Gobinda made a package of the five saris he has woven. He still has some yarn left. The loom is always set up for a number of saris at a time. Since this is such a special design they are weaving fewer numbers than is usual. Normally a loom is set up for 20 to 25 saris. Although Gobinda's quota for this week is only five saris, he has set his loom for six saris. A skilled weaver can almost always save on the yarn he is advanced for the stipulated number of saris. What he has to do is to put fewer threads through the reed for the warp. Though in the hands of an unskilled weaver the sari would turn out too light and transparent, an experienced weaver can hide the deficiency in thread by his expertise in weaving. He still has enough yarn left to weave one more sari. He is expecting a lady from Calcutta in a couple of weeks. This is one of his secret connections to make some extra money out of the yarn advanced to him. Again, he is indebted to his cousin for this. The lady had come to the office of the weavers' cooperative in the village to buy some saris for her own small sari business but did not find any that she liked. His cousin persuaded her to come and see some saris he had. She bought some from him that day and apparently was quite pleased. She came back again the next month and bought some more. Of course these saris were all with the same design that his <u>mahajan</u> was supplying him. Good designs are very expensive and he could never afford to buy some on his own

to weave.

Gobinda handed over his quota of five saris to his mahajan. The mahajan was no fool. He knew very well that weavers steal from their advance of yarn. But he was also realistic enough to know that it would be next to impossible to catch them on that. So the only means he had to keep his profits in control was to find some fault in the weaving, or to penalize them for bringing in their quota late. But even that was becoming increasingly difficult with new mahajans coming up almost everyday. The market is absorbing almost any amount of supply that is coming to it. So anyone who has some capital can buy a few looms and start a mahajani business by giving out those looms to weavers on a hire-purchase basis. There is an enormous demand for good weavers and he has to be careful about not being too harsh with his weavers. After all he has to keep up his supplies to his customer. If he falls short someone else would immediately fill in that vacuum and, who knows, may one day push him out. These days one has to be careful in every step. He has been informed that some of the smaller mahajans are even commissioning the rickshawpullers who wait by the railway station to bring them any new customer they can catch off the train.

Of course Binoy Basak is lucky to have almost three hundred looms working under him and he also has some of the best weavers in the village. He pays them well too. His

customer on Russell Street is really very careful about the quality of the weave. It is because his weavers are among the best that he has been able to continue doing business with them. The only problem with them is that they are sometimes too late to pay up his bills. That is a problem with any wholesale customer they have in the city. No matter how big a mahajan you may be in the village you are ultimately dependent upon these retail sellers in the city. A mahajan who has three hundred looms working under him cannot go into retail business because the market is too seasonal for him to keep all his weavers working throughout the year. It is only the wholesalers in the city who has the capital to hold on to their stocks until the peak season. And surely the wholesalers know how dependent the village mahajans are on them and are not at all afraid to postpone their payment. Hence the onus is on the village mahajans to always be on the search for new customers, so that if one fails to pay they can hope to break-even with another and have enough working capital to have all the looms running. Given their situation, the only way to survive in this market is to keep expanding ones business. For a mahajan always has to keep his weavers fed, i.e., have work for them. If he does not, he runs the risk of having them switch over to another mahajan. But to keep his weavers fed, he must have enough working capital coming in from the sale of his products. The crux of the problem for

him is that he can never reach an equilibrium between the demand for his product and the number of weavers he has working under him to supply that demand. Because at any point of time, some of his customers will hold back on their payment and he will have to fill up the gap by drawing upon his own reserve. But if the gap grows too big his reserve may be inadequate to meet it. Furthermore, given the uncertainty of the market, he can never be sure that his customers will be there tomorrow. So his only security in the business is to constantly expand and find new markets for his products.

Though Binoy knows that going into retail marketing all the way will not solve his problem, he is never unwilling to entertain retail customers. For one thing, these retail connections often lead him to wholesale connections. Also, to have some important and rich retail customer is always a very good means of expanding ones retail network. And his retail network so far has served him very well. Often it has helped him to tide over temporary shortage of cash.

Binoy Basak is one of the few mahajans who has a retail shop in an exclusive area in fashionable south Calcutta. He commutes to Calcutta twice a week and attends his shop personally. Though he has some sales persons there he does not quite trust them to establish a rapport with the customers. As he has learnt through experience , personal rapport with the customer is very important in

this business. Each and every woman that steps in through the door of his shop is looking for some sari rare enough so that they will not come face to face with another woman wearing the same. At the same time, the women are wary of being cheated into buying something at a price that is not worth it. Though there are some general ideas about a broad range within which the price of a type of sari may fall, when it comes to one particular sari the consumer has no means to any definite knowledge about the value of it. The price of each particular sari ultimately depends upon the aura of rarity or exclusivity that a woman may read into a sari, given her specific knowledge about where the sari is coming from and the social meaning of it. Given the uncertainty in the women's knowledge about a sari, Binoy has some room to play around with the readings a woman may have of a particular sari. If he can establish a relation of trust he may be able to change a reading to some extent and make it more worthwhile for the women to buy it as a special sari. Binoy is quite proud of his mastery of the art of social interaction among the bhadralok[4] community. He is a worldly-wise man, and had come to understand quite early in his business career that if he has to compete with the Calcutta based retail sellers or even have successful business dealings with them he will have to learn the "language" of this world. He is subjectively aware of his difference from the city culture. In his everyday life

lived-experience he is conscious of the differences in his feelings about matters from the average city person. Also he is aware of the objective system of classification operative among the city people that always classifies him, and his kind, as the "illiterate weaver"(ashikkhito tanti), the "villager"(geyo).

As a matter of fact, Binoy agrees with the objective classification. He functions in both the worlds and knows the reality that supports the classification. He knows for a fact that weavers are illeterate, and also that they are villagers, with all the connotations that these terms imply. As a practical man, he does not waste his time in thinking about the inherent unfairness of this state of things. After all, how many things in this world are fair! He has identified his problem as that of immediate survival in this alien world, and has very consciously and painstakingly cultivated the "Calcutta style". It has paid off. In his acquired Calcutta accent he can now discuss the merits and demerits of a sari with a prospective customer and often convince her to buy one or two saris more than she had intended to buy. In fact, Binoy Basak is quite an expert now in reading the women who come to his shop for the kind of saris they will like. He has come to develop a feel for the subtle class-differences that distinguish his city-customers and is quite adept at dealing with each one differently. Thus, he usually starts showing the saris of

lighter shades and narrow border if the woman is a young college going one, but will show a lighter shade with a wide border if the woman happens to be a middle aged one. To a newly married woman he usually does not show saris in shades of red (because, he figures, she will already have atleast a dozen of them) but in other darker shades, and so on.

Of the five saris that Gobinda had brought back to him Binoy chose four to go the shop on Russell Street. This shop is one of the most expensive sari-shops in Calcutta. They have their personal designer who is one of the most reputed designers in Calcutta now. Binoy's contract with them is that they supply him with the designs along with the combination of colors in which they are to be woven. He is supposed to supply these saris only to this shop as the designs are considered very "exclusive". But Gobinda's cousin had the right information: Binoy does supply saris with these "exclusive" designs to some other customers. It all started with the perennial problem of temporary shortage of cash. Too many of his wholesale customers were holding back their payment and he was in a financial crunch. He met a new wholesale customer who particularly liked a sari with an "exclusive" design
and asked him if he could make a few more of those for her along with others. She was ready to make a large advance on them. That was the beginning and it has not stopped since

then. This time he was going to sell this "exclusive" sari to another wholesaler from out of Calcutta.

The lady (Geeta Dasgupta) who bought the sixth sari from Gobinda runs a small business from her home in south Calcutta. She is in her mid- forties and is the wife of a middle level executive in one of the state government offices. Her introduction to the world of sari-business was like many other middle-class Bengali women. One of her female relatives was running a sari-business and she had gone there one day at her request. On that very day the weaver who supplied her (the relative) with saris had also come in with more supplies. He was a persuasive salesman. He showed her many varieties of saris from the bundle he was carrying. According to the craze of the day, many of the saris had a narrow golden border (along with the design on the border) woven with muga thread[7]. As an experienced sari-buyer, Geeta knew that muga is relatively expensive. Yet the saris were not that expensive. At first Geeta was suspicious of the fact. She checked the saris very carefully to detect any sign of flawed weaving, she argued with the man for the durability of the color of the sari saying that she had once bought a sari of such dark shade and when she tried to wash it at home her entire load of laundry was changed into the color of the sari, she even accused him of buying his saris wholesale from somewhere else (in which case there is no point in buying it from

him). The man, however, proved to have exemplary control over his temper and ended up convincing her to give this business a try. He even allowed her to take the first assignment on credit and pay him later when she gets them sold. This offer was a big incentive to Geeta as she was not quite sure that her husband would financially assist her in launching her business venture. He never had much respect for her business acumen. Since then she had been at it.

Even though Geeta eventually dropped that weaver with whom she first started business (his designs were becoming very repititive), she found this business quite a lucrative one on a small scale. It had the advantage that she could be a housewife and still earn money. This was a big plus. Given the everyday responsibilities of running the house and looking after all the family members, the duties that gave her her identity as a woman (in her words: I have to do my household works. Then if I get time I do something else), she never entertained the thought of working outside the house. For this business, she only had to go to the village once in a couple of weeks, spend a day there, meet the weaver who was a regular with her now and collect her supply. She really liked the choice of saris this weaver showed her. As someone with a lifetimes experience in saris and their prices, she was sure that she was getting a very good choice at a very low price though she did not quite

know why. But not knowing did not bother her so long as she was confident of the quality of her stock. In fact, her business at home was thriving. She now has a reputation among her neighbours for her collection and reasonable price. They often come to her, instead of going to one of those shops on Rashbehari Avenue, if they suddenly have an urge to buy a new sari or have to buy one as a gift for some special occasion on a short notice. Her advantage over those shops is accounted for by a kind of accessibility that is generated by spatial and social proximity. The women who decide to buy from her do so (even though they feel that her stock and hence her variety is smaller than the established shops) because they get a sense of control over the process and thereby are more sure of the value of what they are buying. The socially acknowledged relation of friendship that she has with most of her customers allows them to come over to her place to look at saris at their own convenience, to take one home to show their husbands to get their approval before buying, to pay in installments, to discuss the relative quality of her saris with other neighborly friends (as opposed to the formal non-communicative buying at the shop). The overall effect is one of more information and hence more control over the meaning of what they are consuming and producing as signs.

This necessarily sketchy account of the trajectory of

six "Tangail" saris helps to bring into focus the problem one faces when trying to identify units of this commodity as a first step towards understanding the meaning of the language object,"Tangail sari". In the retail network in the city of Calcutta, each sari is dealt with as a singular object. The saris on the shelves of shops tells nothing of the story of the trajectory that brought them there, nor the story of their production as identical units in a set. The way saris are displayed at shops supports this myth of singularity of each piece. The sign "Tangail sari" comes to signify each and every piece of sari as a singular object. Once its history is drained out of it, it is open for appropriation by a mythic language. The context of the market, the social meaning of the place from which it is being sold, the purpose with which the buyer wants to buy, the information that the buyer has, this complex network of discursive knowledge appropriates the meaning of the form "Tangail sari" and plays with it in many different ways.

Let us now visit these saris in their singular form in the shops where they are being sold from.

Mrs. Bhattacharya ordered her chauffer to get the car out. Her husband gets a car for his own use from the mercantile firm he works for, so she has this car at her disposal whenever she needs to go anywhere on her own. It has been five years now that her husband got a promotion in

the office and they got their own car. Now-a-days she cannot even imagine going anywhere without the car. The public transportation system in Calcutta is so horrible! No bhadralok can ride in one and still retain ones identity. Sometimes she wonders if the city itself will be livable for bhadraloks for too long[6]. She is lucky that her husband got this apartment from his office in Alipore. This is the only residential area in Calcutta where one can escape from the terrible confusion and muddle the city is these days. But she is not at all sure how long this haven will be able to hold on to its own. Especially with the Left Front Government in power in the State now, the chotoloks[7] are becoming more and more arrogant every day. Just think of the kind of ridiculous demands your maids and servants make these days! The other day her maid told her that she will not accept a sari worth less than Rs 100 for her Puja gift. And they threaten to quit at the drop of a hat! Mrs. Bhattacharya is sure that the Left Front Government cadres instigate these chotoloks. Or how can they disregard all propriety this way ? She sincerely hopes this government loses in the next election.

Now that the Pujas[8] are only a couple of months away, Mrs.Bhattacharya has started her Puja shopping in earnest. She often resents having to give gifts to so many of her relatives. In these days of inflation it is so hard to make both ends meet. Of course in her turn she gets saris as

counter-gifts. But as every one knows, when buying gifts people always try to economize by buying from those cheap shops where you get only common saris. She is sure that these cheap stores get their saris from Barabazar[9] on wholesale. These days handloom saris are found almost anywhere. One has to be careful about the quality when something is found in such abundance. If she has to buy a handloom sari for herself she would never go to those sidewalk sales. Those salesmen are all crooks. If one does not have very good knowledge of prices of various saris or cannot tell the difference between a Tangail and a Shantipuri one is sure to be cheated. They will pass off a Shantipuri for the price of a Tangail. She had once accompanied a friend of hers, who is known for her flair for bargaining, to one of those sidewalk shops. Her intention was to buy something for her maid as Puja gift without having to spend a fortune on that. She picked up one sari in a kind of garish bright blue (those are the kind of colors maids love!) but was shocked to hear that it was priced at Rs 80. Her friend, the acknowledged expert in bargaining, started the ball rolling by saying, "but we are just coming from another shop" , pointing in the direction of Gariahat,"I saw another sari just like this. They were asking 60 for it. Even that is too much! How do you expect us to pay 80?" The man replied with the crafty smile of an experienced salesman ,"didi[10], I am sure you can tell the

difference in quality. Just see", he opened the fold of the sari at one end and gave it to her to check,"feel the weave. See how compact it is. You can wear it for years,didi, and I can guarantee you it will stay intact." "That is all nonsense! You think I do not know saris? We will not pay anything above 55 for this one," countered her friend. The man's expression registered a kind of indignation:"but didi, where will you find a Tangail sari for 55? You want to buy a sari for 55 I have many in that range, but those will be Dhanekhali or Shantipuri. I can give it to you for 75, but 55 is out of the question."

That day they did not finally buy a sari. Her friend has promised to take her to Barabazar one day. Mrs. Bhattacharya herself would never venture to go to such far off places[11] (she has always been a kind of homebody), but her friend said she personally knew a Barabazar sari seller who would sell them the same sari at a wholesale price.

Today Mrs.Bhattacharya is going to the sari shop on Russell Street. When she has to buy a sari for herself she sticks to such reliable shops. The first time she went there was with the wife of a colleague of her husband's. Since the time her husband has received this promotion her social circle has changed along with his. She now gets to hobnob with some of the wealthy elites (something she enjoys a lot) and she takes care to dress right for such social occasions. Mrs.Basu,the lady who took her to this

shop the first time, has an enormous collection of saris and is never seen in the same sari twice. It is from Mrs.Basu that she learnt this shop has its own designer. Mrs.Basu is treated very specially there and has even had a sari especially designed for her by their designer. The informed conversation that Mrs.Basu had with one of the salesgirls really impressed her. That day she learnt about the specialty of "Tangail" designs that their designer has done some research on (hence one gets authentic Tangail designs on handloom saris from this shop), and how the designer has innovated upon the "traditional" designs found among the weavers of Bengal. This man, the designer, used to work for the Regional Design Center of West Bengal, which is a government owned institution that tries to promote indigenous arts and crafts by improving upon the traditional forms to appeal to the taste of the consumers in the city. Their goal is to make folk arts and crafts commercially viable and thereby ensure the survival of these forms.

Mrs.Bhattacharya bought a silk Tangail sari for herself. She paid Rs.350 for it. This is one of the four saris that Binoy Basak has supplied to them. The salesgirl told her this was one of their "exclusive" designs. Since her first visit to this shop, Mrs.Bhattacharya has developed a feel for the singularity of saris . She could right away see how the design on the sari is a reworking of

the traditional "flower and creeper" design. It reminded her of one old Shantipuri sari her mother had. It was a favorite of her mother's. The color-combination that went with the sari was of course very modern. This combination of bright green with blue is often found in South Indian saris. Combination of the two styles, Bengali design and South Indian color scheme, gave the sari its novelty. Mrs. Bhattacharya looked at a few more saris. Almost all of them were some kind of combination of design or color from various parts of India. Thus there was one sari woven with a combination of cotton and silk (that is the warp was silk and the weft was cotton) which had a woven border in Tangail style (or that is what the salesgirl told her) and the body of the sari had been printed with Kashmiri patterns using the technique of block-printing. This shop is known for such innovative patterning and they credit it to their famous designer.

Geeta Dasgupta is busy organizing an exhibition of saris at her home. It is a couple of months away from the Pujas and just the right time to hold an exhibition. Exhibition of saris is quite a recent phenomenon in the commodity scene in the city. It is very popular as the world of saris is expanding too fast for any single customer to know its extent. There are new saris coming out every year and exhibitions are particular seller's way of letting the customers know of the newest stock she has

acquired. "New" is the word in the sari world today. Geeta is holding her exhibition with the same purpose: to exhibit her collection of "new" saris. She is confident of having a good many people to visit it. Even if only the women from her neighborhood (para) show up, without counting all her near and distant relatives whom she has invited and the relatives of her neighbors, she is sure of being able to sell enough to make a small profit. She has already spread the word around by way of making afternoon visits to the houses of some of her neighbors. Most of them are housewives like her, and the afternoon is the best time to find them in a relaxed mood. Almost all of them have now started thinking seriously about how many saris they will have to buy as gifts and how much they want to spend on that. It is also the time to start fantasizing about what kind of saris they want to buy for themselves and for their near and dear ones. Geeta usually takes an honest approach with her prospective customers: she lets them know that she has a sizable stock of "ordinary" (shadharon) handloom and printed saris. In fact she takes care to buy a stock of Dhanekhali and Shantipuri saris from Barabazar. These cheap saris are often bought by people as gifts for distant relatives or for their maids. But of course she does not forget to mention that she had been to the village to pick up some special saris from her weaver, and that these are very new designs. She has already established a

credibility among her neighbors as a woman of good taste, primarily through her connections with the small school of Rabindrasangeet[12] they run in her neighborhood. After all people who send their daughters to learn Rabindrasangeet are usually people of good taste and one always gets to develop a network of women-of-refined taste when associated with a school like that. This network has stood her in good stead in her business.

Amita Sen is a neighbor of Geeta Dasgupta. She has bought the Tangail sari that Geeta collected from the weaver in the village. She paid Rs.290 for it. In fact she bought it for her college going daughter. She herself has given up wearing such bright color, considering it to be unbecoming of her age, ever since her eldest daughter started going to college. Though she takes care to dress well, she restricts herself to subdued colors and wide bordered saris. This particular sari caught her attention because of its unusual color-combination. It was obviously in the South Indian style. She still owns some South Indian Kanchipuram silk saris from her younger days. Those days South Indian silks were not available in Calcutta so easily, and when they were available they were exorbitantly priced. But South Indian saris and their gorgeous colors always fascinated her. She was also lucky to have an aunt on her mother's side whose husband was posted in South India for his job. This aunt was very fond of her. She

would bring a collection of Kanchipuram silks with her each time she visited Calcutta on Puja vacations and present her with one as Puja gift every year. The rest she would sell among relatives.

But Amita was not just trying to recreate a memory. In fact South Indian saris are much more abundantly available in Calcutta these days. What with the government owned textile shops selling saris from all over India and innumerable private shops that stock all kinds of saris, there is no longer anything special about owning a South Indian sari. Amita knows that Geeta collects part of her supply from a weaver in the village. In Amita's perception of the world, objects obtained from the source are always worth more than those that reaches you through several intermediaries. That is why she values her old South Indian saris bought by her aunt <u>in</u> South India over those she can buy at some shop in Calcutta. In her opinion those older saris are of incomparably superior quality than any that can be bought at a Calcutta shop. Because, "after all you never know that you are getting the real thing". By the same logic, Geeta's connection with the village weaver raises the value of Geeta's saris in her eyes in terms of its authenticity. That is why she thinks Geeta's prices are also reasonable. Amita is sure if she had to buy this same sari from one of those fancy shops on Park Street or even from Dhakeswari Bastralaya in Gariahat she would end up

paying atleast ten fifteen rupees extra. She understands these shops have to include the cost of their establishment in the price of the sari. In fact Amita never quite trusts the big shops. She firmly believes that she would always find a rare sari at a good price from a small dealer like Geeta than at those big shops. She is not a believer in big names. She has enough confidence in her ability to recognize a good sari when she sees one. This sari has a very smooth weave. She can tell it will last long. Also this sari has a narrower border which she thinks is in better taste than those very heavy wide bordered ones. The wide borders are also becoming very common.

Leela Mukherjee, another neighbor of Geeta, was not so trusting of Geeta's prices. Of course Geeta has good taste and you can always find some good ones at Geeta's exhibitions. She has seen the sari Amita bought for 290. She would not pay that much for that sari. It has such a narrow border! If it had a wider border with more embroidery on it that might have justified the price. Sure, Geeta's prices are lower than those fashionable shops like Kundahaar or Tuntuni, but that is hardly a justification! If you ask her, she thinks the design on the border of the sari is a very common one. She has seen hundreds of others like that. She has a cousin who also runs a sari business from her home like Geeta. She has learnt a lot about saris and their prices from her cousin. Her cousin had even

visited Geeta's shop once with her and thought the prices were unreasonably high. In an affluent neighborhood like this, where people do not care to shop around much for the right price, people like Geeta always get away with such things. That sari should not cost more than 250.

The last sari in our story, the one Binoy Basak secretly sold to another wholesaler, has travelled far. It is now being sold at a sari shop in Asansol in the state of Bihar. There is a sizable community of Bengalis there who are very eager for saris from Calcutta. These people are also reasonably well off and are often willing to pay for something that they think is high fashion in Calcutta. This particular wholesaler capitalizes on that. Not much information is available to most of these people about prices of saris in Calcutta, and he has established a credibility that he gets his supplies from a very well-known dealer in Calcutta who also supplies to the "exclusive" shop on Russell Street. Our particular piece sold for Rs.320 there.

This brief account brings certain factors to light. As I have already noted, the historical meaning of the sign "Tangail" is drained out in the context of the market. One piece of commodity called "Tangail sari" stands as an object to which a <u>differential</u> value comes to be associated

: a Tangail is not a Shantipuri or a Dhanekhali. This difference is understood as the special weave of a Tangail that is not to be found in Shantipuri or Dhanekhali, the specialty of its designs. At the same time, it is a constituent part of a series whose origin is signified by the name "Tangail". In this latter sense, all the distinct pieces of saris are examples of works by an author, they are all classified in terms of the signature they bear.

But the crucial difference here is that, unlike a text which is legitimized as the work of an "individual" author, and thereby re-presents the oeuvre of the individual, here production is organized within a community (defined in terms of its members' historical homeland). The technology and economy of the system of production does not permit weaving a single piece at a time (in our example the loom was set for only six identical saris. In extreme cases, even forty identical saris are woven out of one setting), nor is the product in some sense the expression of an individuated consciousness (in most of the cases, the design is supplied by someone other than the actual weaver). In the market, however, the saris appear as singular objects, and are judged in a context which is entirely divorced from the context of production. The indeterminacy and differences in the prices of identical pieces is accountable in terms of the differential in information that comes into play as each buyer reads the

"text" confronting her and tries to place it, make it meaningful, within a context that derives from her specific position. An act of purchase is an act of production too. It produces a particular sari as a sign within a system of signs. The signs in this case, however, are "significations", in the sense in which Roland Barthes uses the word to mean the sign-object used in a mythical language.[15] The readings of the women-consumers are modes of significations which function to appropriate the actual history, the meaning, of a Tangail sari to produce a mythical "concept", once again borrowing Barthes' use of it.

Let us take the case of one of our buyers, Amita Sen. Her social position provides her with certain predispositions about the aesthetic components of the sari. Such as its narrow border, which she reads as "less common" (aankamon); its color, which she reads as a connection with a culturally-spatially distant aesthetic tradition and hence a kind of "familiarization of the exotic"; its weave, which is "smooth" (masreen) in terms of some standard of smoothness of texture. At the same time, the value of these signs in the sari is augmented by the story of Geeta's direct connection with the source of the object. The story thus serves the purpose of signification that produces the myth of "authenticity" for this particular sari. Its historical meaning is appropriated by another story, that

of the origin and its supremacy.

Another consumer, Leela Mukherjee, reads the same object in a reverse way that implies a lower value. Her mode of signification makes use of the figure of her cousin as the repository of knowledge about the authenticity of saris. With this story she appropriates the meaning of the object in the myth of non-singularity by embedding it in a wider context of other weavers producing similar objects. In both cases, however, the meaning produced is a mythical meaning, a meaning that is extraneous to the actual history of the object.

Walter Benjamin in his "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction"[14] argues that technical progress in the modern age has advanced the cause of the critique of bourgeous Fascist aestheticization of class politics. By making possible reproductions of works of art on a mass scale, it has served to produce the conditions for an effective critique of the power that is exercised through producing an "aura" of a work of art. By believing in the ideology of "l'art pour l'art", the masses become complicit to a process of reproduction of themselves as opposed to a bourgeouis elite. Mechanical reproduction of works of art displaces that "aura" and thus produces a critique of "tradition".

In our case, the question of authenticity/exclusivity

does not arise given the structural conditions of production. Yet, at the moment of consumption, each singular sari is read for and against the signs of authenticity/exclusivity. Instead of displacing the aura of the Authentic, it tends to produce authenticity where there is none. Benjamin called for a "politicization of art" as a counter-discourse to Fascist "aestheticization of politics". How can there be a radically critical reading when the consuming masses themselves are engaged in producing an aura, inventing an origin where there was none? The answer has to be sought in the different mode of exercise of power in the era of bourgeouis capitalism. Power is exercised now by secularizing the political, thereby producing a myth of equality. The ubiquitous commodity is the great leveller, in the sense of assuring everyone the same meaning in the act of its consumption. A radical critique of this form of capitalism has to take the form of producing the non-secular, the authentic where there is none. My reading of several different acts of consumption of the same commodity thus seeks to represent the politics the masses practice.

ENDNOTES:

1. Mukherjee,S.N.1977. Calcutta: Myths and History. Subarnarekha, Calcutta, page 98.

2. More will be said about this phenomenon in a later chapter on the history of the construction of women as a public figure. For the moment, the period in the history of Bengal that is signified as the Bengal

Renaissance is the period when urban Bengali culture was changing very rapidly under the influence of a colonial culture. The changes primarily consisted in an active effort on the part of the Western educated elite to translate some ideas of "modernity" into indigenous terms.

3. A mahajan is a person who sells saris woven by other weavers working under him either on the basis of an advance of yarn from him or on a rented loom from him along with advanced yarn. The mahajan serves as the connection between the small weaver and the city.

4. The indigenous term for the urban-middle class Bengali. Though the term is masculine, the sign is used as a general one to signify the class as a whole, irrespective of gender.

5. A kind of natural silk cultivated primarily in the north-eastern region in India, such as Assam.

6. Here the allusion is to the social traits of refinement of taste, aloofness from mundane matters and attempts at maintaining a psychological distance from the jostling of the "masses" that mark the bearing of someone belonging to the bhadralok class. Public transport in Calcutta is inadequate for the population of the city and hence always overcrowded. Mrs. Bhattacharya's bhadralok self cringes at the thought of having to be physically close to the shoving, pushing crowd one meets in a public transport.

7. The chotoloks are the cultural opposites of the bhadraloks and lower in the order of hierarchy (from the bhadralok's point of view). They are the masses, the working class, the "hoi polloi" as opposed to the elite bhadraloks.

8. Puja or Durgapuja is the most important religious-social festival in Bengal. It is also the most important occasion for gift-giving in the form of clothes to significant others. The importance of clothing and textile as a form of gift in traditional Indian culture has been noted by many scholars,e.g., Barney Cohn in his forthcoming article on the role of cloth in the evolving colonial sociology of India. In the indigenously recognized social relations, servants and maids were part of the family and relatives and hence had to be given a cloth to mark the relation. Moreover, traditionally gift-giving was performed as an act of marking social hierarchy, i.e., gifts were

always given by the socially higher ups to those of a socially lower standing. This is very different from the Christian practice of gift-giving at Christmas where the principle governing the act is that of "equal love" that legitimizes a gift from anyone to anyone.

9. It is the central wholesale market in Calcutta and one of the biggest in eastern India.

10. The kinship term for addressing ones elder sister. In the anonymous context of the city, this form is often used by men to address women of upper class. It is, however, only men from the lower classes that use it as a fictive kinship form of address. The form has become all the more popular since women from the bhadralok class these days do not like being called by kinship terms such as maashima (mother's sister) or boudi (brother's wife) which is taken to imply that one is past ones youth.

11. Barabazaar is located in the northern part of the city. While the geographical distance between north and south Calcutta is not unbridgable, the cultural and psychic distance is considerable for someone who considers herself a resident of south Calcutta. I shall talk more about the north/south dichotomy in the cultural topography of the city in a later chapter.

12. Rabindrasangeet refers to songs written by Rabindranath Thakur. The author was a man of multiple talents and was a deep influence on urban Bengali culture through his writings. His creative works were rapidly institutionalised (his poems and proses in school textbooks, his songs in special schools for teaching them) and thus became a part of the techniques of reproducing class distinctions. Knowing Rabindranath Thakur's works are a social sign of refinement in Bengali culture.

13. Barthes,R. 1972. Mythologies. Hill and Wang, New York, page 117.

14. Benjamin,W.
1969 "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Illuminations, (ed) Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books, New York.

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HANDWOVEN TANGAIL SARI IN THE MARKET OF CALCUTTA

Volume II

By

Dulali Nag

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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Department of Anthropology

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CHAPTER IV

THE HETERODOXIC WORLD OF TANGAIL SARIS

An object is made meaningful by the gaze of the consumer who brings with her the history that produced the gaze. An act of reading deploys a certain implicit knowledge of a code, a knowledge acquired and internalized by the reader through everyday practice in the context of a social position and the complex network of differences that constitute, to use an expression by Bourdieu, the structuring principle of that structural position. By means of an ethnographic description of various readings of Tangail saris in the market, I want to bring to light some of the structuring principles that produce a Tangail sari as an object.

Tangail Saris in The Market

Binoy Basak, who is a mahajan in the village of Fulia and has about three hundred weavers working under him, owns a shop in South Calcutta which is about fifteen minutes walk from Gariahat market. Even though it is so close to the major shopping center in South Calcutta, Binoy's shop does very good business. Every tuesday and thursday Binoy commutes to Calcutta with his supplies from Fulia (he has made enough money in this business to be able to afford a private car). Those two days are also days when Binoy

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personally attends his customers. Though initially he had planned only to carry out wholesale business of his own from there, over time his network expanded to include many retail customers. Most of his customers are residents of South Calcutta.

The cultural topography of the city divides it into primarily two zones, the more "conservatively traditional" north and the "culturally sophisticated" south, with the "central" part being commonly referred to as the _office para_,i.e.,the office-neighborhood, thereby signifying the largely non-residential character of the locality. The conservatism of the North is often portrayed by a southerner as a lack of "taste", an unawareness of contemporary aesthetics of fashion. This opposition between conservatism and sophistication tells the story of the process of "modernization" in Bengal. The history of modernization involved a series of reform movements that tried to incorporate ideas of western liberal humanism (such as the abolition of _sati_ or the remarriage of widows or female "education") along with attempts at appropriating many western cultural forms by translating them into indigenous cultural forms (such as writing novels and poems in the indigenous language in the western romantic tradition). In both the cases, "modernity" came to represent a fullness of meaning as compared to "tradition". From this point of view, "pure" tradition came to mean a

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lack. The same historical structure of signification can be seen to be functioning in the popular opposition in the lack of sophistication of the northerners to the presence of it among the southerners.

This tuesday is a busy day at Binoy's shop. Even though Binoy called it his "shop" (dokan), it was actually located in an apartment he has bought a few months back. Before that he used to rent a small room in the building next door. But that room was becoming increasingly inadequate for the kind of crowd his shop was getting. He bought this apartment on installment; the payments will not be over until the beginning of the next year. Though he could have entered the apartment as soon as the papers were signed, he waited until the puja season was closer to move in, for then he could combine the grihaprabesh(entering-the-house ritual) with an increased sale. He had a proper grihaprabesh ritual before starting his business here. He respects these rituals. At any rate, he is not adventurous enough to try to disprove their efficacy by not holding them. Too much is at stake for him. Of course grihaprabesh is a social occasion too, and Binoy had sent invitation cards to all his customers. He had speciallly ordered packets of sweets from Mouchak, one of the best known sweetmeat shops near Gariahat, and personally supervised that each one of his guests be presented with one. Binoy is at his social best on occasions like this. He adroitly

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combines salesmanship with being the host. Of course he knows his customers do not treat his invitations as just a gesture of social nicety. Their relations are too hierarchical for that. After all, his customers are all from the bhadralok class,a people who are defined by their distance and essential superior qualities from all others who are engaged in making their livelihood from some kind of personal business or menial activities. Moreover, he is only a tanti(weaver) by his jat(caste). Binoy believes in the essential superiority of the bhadraloks, and accepts the social fact that they will never mix with his kind, who are set apart from the bhadraloks by their residence in the "village", their lower caste and their means of livelihood.

[Figure II graphically demonstrates the cultural perception, shared both by the villager and the urban middle class, of the relation between formal western education and ones position in the social strata, which I have chosen to signify, following Bourdieu, as symbolic and financial capital]

Therefore He cannot invite his customers to some social event that cannot at the same time be combined with selling saris. But these somewhat general ritual occasions help him to make his customers develop a sense of familiarity and thereby a sense of confidence and trust in him, which are his most valuable assets in this business.

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Binoy knows that no buyer of handloom sari trusts the seller completely, and that each buyer is uncertain about the exclusiveness or the exact price of a particular sari (even though she may be generally knowledgeable). The gulf can be bridged to some extent by the buyer's sense of familiarity with the seller, which gives her the confidence that she will have access to the relatively exclusive saris he stores away for favored customers. This business runs on

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THE CITY/VILLAGE DISTINCTION IN CULTURAL TERMS

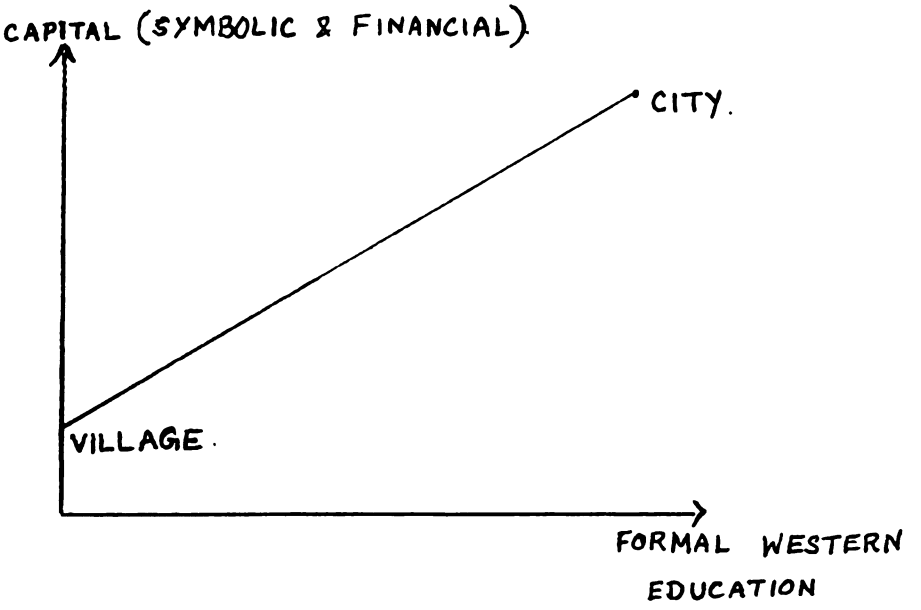


FIGURE II

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a finely tuned balance between secrecy and openness: an openness that always suggests the existence of a secret. Binoy never forgets to drop hints like "didi, if you come next week I shall have some special Katki-Tangail to show you" to the people he wants to capture as regular customers.

What is the nature of the economy at work here? Clearly the social relation between the "villager" and the "city people" is not merely "economic". A hierarchy constituted of higher and lower caste, tanti and bhadralok, educated and uneducated is involved here. The economic wealth that is generated in transactions in this market is realized, partly, by articulating the social distance/hierarchy in the language of cultural ritual. It would be wrong to argue that "ritual" language is being used for "economic" ends, unless we simultaneously recognize the fact that the economic relation is an outcome of a historically structured social relation, and a perception of it, which makes the practice of the ritual in an economic context an expression of the social relations that constitute the economic actors.

Binoy opens his shop as early as eight o'clock in the morning. It is only a couple of months to the Pujas, and his showroom in the apartment is already almost full to capacity.

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the room, the other side being taken up by used saris which he takes for re-glossing (Tangail saris are believed to retain their "glaze" longer if re-glossed at regular intervals. Only a Tangail weaver knows how to re-gloss a

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SARI FEATURES AND THE CULTURAL DISTINCTIONS THEY EMBODY

1. **BORDER**

   Narrow:Wide :: Young:Old :: Fashion:Sobriety ::

   Light:Heavy:: Less:More

2. **COLOR**

   Dark:Light :: Old:Young :: More:Less

   The Opposition Red/White, However, Cuts Across The Above

   Red:White :: Feminine Sexuality Present:Feminine Sexuality Absent :: Young:Old

   From This Angle, The Structural Qualities Can Be Interpreted

   Red:White :: Dark:Light :: Young:Old

   Thus Reversing The Prior Reading

3. **TEXTURE**

   Fine (mihi), Coarse (mota)

   Fine:Coarse :: Refined:Simple :: Luxury:Hardship ::

   Superiority:Inferiority

TABLE II

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TYPOLOGY OF HANDLOOM SARIS

1. **INTER-REGIONAL DISTINCTIONS**

Bengal
Orissa
Maharashtra
South India
North India

2. **INTRA-REGIONAL DISTINCTIONS**

Bengal -----	Tangail, Baluchari, Dhanekhali, Shantipuri etc.
Orissa -----	Sambalpuri, Katki
South India -----	Kanchipuram, Pochampalli, Kalakshetra
Maharashtra -----	Pune, Patola, Kota
North India -----	Benarasi, Phulkari, Kalamkari

TABLE III

---

sari, for the particular shine found in Tangail saris is attributed to a special technique that is known only to Tangail weavers). A little more than half of the floor of the room is taken up by a thick mattress covered by a white sheet,on which everyone is sitting around. Atleast forty to fifty saris have been taken out of the shelves and are presently lying on the mattress in various unfolded states. The women are periodically pointing out a particular sari they would like to see from the shelves, and Binoy's helping hands are immediately getting them down on the mattress.

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[The two tables on the preceeding pages, Table II and Table III, are introduced in advance of the text to facilitate the reader's understanding of some of the oppositional signs that are used in the descriptive and in the analytical part. Table II provides in schematic form the cultural meanings that are structurally associated with sari features. There are three formal features in a handwoven sari: its border, its color, and its texture. The table represents, in a structural form, the distinctions that are found among these forms and the cultural oppositions that are normally associated with these.

Table III is self-explanatory. It schematically represents distinctions made among handwoven saris on another level. This is done on the basis of the region of origin of the sari. Within the region, then, further distinctions are made on the basis of the smaller regions within the larger region or on the basis of the style of the weaving.]

Let us now look closely at some of the women that are present at Binoy's shop this morning. What are their readings of the different objects they are faced with?

Sabita Basu lives in a high-rise building near Golpark on Gariahat road. She is about thirtyfive years old, with a husband and two kids. She was married when she was twentytwo and now has one daughter twelve years of age and a son five years of age. Her marriage was a normal arranged

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marriage. Her maternal uncle had a colleague whose third cousin was looking for a suitable match for her engineer son. Sabita's own family was not as well-off as her in-laws. Her father held a small clerical position in a government office. They did not live in Calcutta proper either, but in Barasat, on the outskirts of Calcutta. By the time her uncle brought the information about this match, Sabita's parents had already advertised for her in the matrimonial column in the paper. She had just passed her bachelors from a college in Barasat and was the right age for marriage.

Her parents did not really expect that this marriage will come through. The day her prospective in-laws came to "see" her to decide if she was suitable for their engineer son (they had been shopping around for some time), they did not show much enthusiasm. Her complexion was not fair enough, and though she had a sweet face she was a little short for their son. Her mother-in-law was very keen on finding a pretty bride for her son. However, she was also a great believer in astrology and Sabita's horoscope was the best match for her husband among all the others they looked at. Her mother-in-law decided to compromise on the side of looks in exchange for a happy conjugal life for her son. They lived in a rented apartment on Keyatala road in South Calcutta when Sabita was married thirteen years ago. When her father-in-law retired (he worked for the West Bengal

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Civil Service) they bought this apartment with the money from his providend fund about eight years ago.

Sabita came to know about Binoy Basak's shop from another woman, by the name of Sonali Chatterjee, whom she met at her son's school. The social logic that lay behind her and Sonali's meeting at their son's school can be explained as follows:

It is extremely difficult to get children admitted to good English medium schools these days. Both she and her husband were determined that they were not going to send their son to a second rate Bengali medium school. After putting their little son through a rigorous training to pass the tough admission tests that are administered in these schools, they were fortunate to secure a seat for him in this school in South Calcutta. It is one of the most sought after schools in Calcutta. Primarily because they are reputed for training their students very well and every year students from this school do very well in the statewide high school passing examination. A student's educational prospects are crucially dependent on how well he does in this high school passing exam. His trajectory of life will be determined to a great extent on which college or technical institute he can get admitted to after high school and that is dependent largely on his grades in this high school passing exam. The school authorities cash in on the reputation of their school by admitting as many

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students as they can in the lower grades and then start to get more and more rigorous as students progress towards the higher grades. Lots of students fail in these higher grades so that only the best remain to keep up the school's reputation. The outcome is that the lower grades are extremely crowded and it is often difficult for parents to secure a seat for their child in the school bus. Sabita's son did not get a seat. So every morning and every afternoon Sabita has to make a trip to her son's school, once to take him and once to bring him back. Sonali Chatterjee is another mother like her who takes her daughter to school everyday and that is how they met. Sonali told her about this weaver fellow who has a place near Dhakuria Bridge and that Sonali visits there off and on when she wants to shop around for a good sari.

So this morning Sabita was there with the intention of buying a sari for herself. She has planned to buy one sari for herself and one as a gift for her mother-in-law. Her husband is the one who is paying for both of them (she has no income of her own), so the two saris have to be of the same quality. Or it will look like she was depriving her mother-in-law from her right in her son's success and his income.

Sabita has already visited the shop by the name of Damayanti on Rashbehari Avenue. The woman who runs that shop is related to her husband's sister. This sister-in-law

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is married to a doctor whose mother's sister's daughter is the owner of the shop. Sabita's sister-in-law had taken her there. The woman, by the name of Krishna Chakrabarty, personally came to show saris to them. She (Krishna) told them that she gets her supply from the dealer who also supplies Mira Basu. Sabita must say she had a good collection of saris. Specially her collection of jamdanis was just unbelievable, for sheer variety if for nothing else. Quite clearly she specializes in the more expensive varieties. That is only expected from someone who gets her supply from Mira Basu's supplier. Sabita did like one cotton jamdani for herself. It had a beautiful onion-skin-color background and an embroidered border with the design of a burning clay-lamp in majenta. Sabita likes red, though not the garish,bright red that you will see people in the class of maids (jhee class) wearing. The only time a bhadramahila can get away with wearing that color is on her wedding day. But these days more and more girls are refusing to have a bright red sari as their wedding sari on grounds that after the wedding is over it will just sit in the closet and will not be fit to wear anywhere else. Sabita herself has a red Benarasi from her wedding day rotting in her closet. Though there is a sentimental value attached to it, Sabita sometimes wishes she had as much foresight as the young girls of these days. Her mother, when she was shopping for Sabita's wedding, went directly

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to College Street Market in north Calcutta (north Calcutta is closer to Barasat than south Calcutta, also believed to be less expensive) and without much ado bought a bright red Benarasi from the Indian Silk House. That distinctions can be made between wedding saris on the ground of taste is something beyond her mother's conception. Sabita herself has learnt a lot after her marriage. Her mother-in-law, a bhadramahila who has spent most of her life in south Calcutta, is quite a different woman than her mother, even though her mother-in-law is older than her mother. She always takes care to wear a good handloom sari whenever she goes out, which she does more frequently than her mother. Also she never wears anything but a matching blouse with her sari, whereas her mother does not make the subtle differences between shades while choosing a blouse to go with a sari. For her mother, blue is only "one" color. Therefore, as long as she wears a shade of blue as her blouse with a sari which is another shade of blue, she is satisfied with herself for having observed the dress codes. Her mother-in-law matches the blouse with every different shade of blue the sari may come in.

The jamdani sari Sabita was looking at at Damayanti caught her fancy. She wanted to buy a Tangail jamdani for herself for this Puja because she felt she needed to broaden her collection of special-occasion saris. By special occasions she had in mind occasions like a wedding

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reception, or some special cultural program (like sitar playing by Nikhil Bandopadhyaya. Her mother-in-law is very much into classical music and never lets go of any cultural program on classical music in the city. As a good daughter-in-law, she has to accompany her), or some special party at her husband's office. Though she has a sizable collection of Benarasis from her wedding gifts, people do not wear a Benarasi to go to a party, or to a cultural program. She has a few South Indian silks, which are reasonably appropriate for a party or a wedding reception, but not for a cultural program. She has some good printed silks, but those cannot be worn on weddings. The only kind of all-occasion sari she has is one expensive Katki sari from Orissa (she bought it at a handloom exhibition held by the state government every year), a Gadoal sari from South India (bought on the occasion when her mother-in-law wanted to make a trip to the religious spots in South India. Her husband made it an occasion to take the entire family on a vacation tour of South India), and one jamdani that her sister-in-law presented her with last year in the Pujas. But that is not one of her favorites. The color is too drab. It is embroidered with sky blue on a steel-grey background. Her in-laws all prefer such subdued colors.

Though Sabita herself has learnt a lot about taste in her married life, she still leans towards colors like red, blue and green, but in subdued shades. Her sister-in-law rarely

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wears anything in a shade of red. She (the sister-in-law) says she got tired of the color looking at all the red saris she received as her wedding gift. Were it in her power, she would ban giving saris as gifts on weddings, on the ground that people should not have to put up with other people's choices when it comes to dressing. Sabita herself has got a stack of saris from her wedding gifts which are all predominantly red, of some shade or the other. But unlike her sister-in-law, she enjoyed wearing those at least in the first year or so of marriage. She still associates marriage with red dress, specially the first year, when ones newly wed status is still intact. It makes a woman look like the new bride that she is.

Jamdani saris are handwoven with motifs from the Islamic tradition. Popularly, the name is used synonymously with Dhakai saris, i.e., saris from Dhaka woven by the weavers who lived there and specialized in the skill that went into weaving one. In modern day market parlance of Calcutta, saris that have the jamdani motifs embroidered on them are sometimes called Dhakai-jamdani. Almost all the saris that sell in the market now by the name of Dhakai-jamdani are, however, woven in India by the Tangail weavers some of whom have incorporated the jamdani motifs into their own style of embroidering a handwoven sari. Before the Tangail weavers settled in India, Dhakai saris were very rare in Calcutta. Specially before Bangladesh became

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independent, import restrictions made it very difficult for Dhakai saris to reach Calcutta. The rare ones that were sold in the market were exorbitantly priced. Others were part of private collections of people who owned a few from the pre-independence days when Dhakai saris were not so scarce. Combined with a general knowledge of the glorious history of Dhakai weavers and the specialness of Dhakai saris, these saris were objects of very high status. When the Tangail weavers started weaving the Dhakai designs on their looms, the saris still retained their previous high status, but now the criteria of evaluation became more complicated with more saris of the same kind to compare and rank. One of the important criterion is the density of the embroidery. A dense embroidery, through which the weave of the sari cannot be seen is marked very highly. Again, unlike the controversy between the relative desirability of a narrow border or a wide border in a sari with a woven design, Dhakai saris are always appreciated with more embroidery on them than less. Certain color-combinations, such as embroidery with green, red, and black on an off-white background, is considered "classical" and is much in demand.

The meaning of Dhakai-jamdani thus derives from its historical association with fine quality weaving, its rarity in the recent past and the re-appearance of its form in the weaving of the Tangail weavers that made the

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aesthetic experience associated with this object available to more people. Like any object of aesthetic importance, with greater availability the value of the object comes to rely more and more on technalities of judgment as authenticity as a criterion becomes more and more difficult to apply.

The jamdani Sabita was looking at did not have the requisite density in its embroidery, or so was pointed out by her sister-in-law who was accompanying her. Sabita herself is not very good at telling these differences, unless they are obvious. She would have quite happily bought the sari at Rs.375, the asking price. To her, the embroidery was quite novel and the color was to her taste. As far as her knowledge goes, 375 seemed to be a fair price for a sari of this class. But her sister-in-law is more of a connoisseur_in these matters. She visits shops like Mira Basu's and Kundahaar quite regularly and knows a good sari by the looks of it. Though the owner of the shop was a distant relative of hers on her husband's side, she made some polite excuses about looking for some other colors and did not let Sabita buy that one.

So this morning Sabita was at Binoy Basak's shop, without her sister-in-law, to choose a sari for herself and her mother-in-law. She still wanted to buy a jamdani, and for her mother-in-law she has decided to buy a <u>tasar</u> Tangail. She remembers that her mother owned a <u>tasar</u> sari

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which she saved safely for important ritual occasions. Even fifteen years back, before Sabita got married, tasar saris would usually be unbleached and have a yellowish white color that one associates with ritual occasions. Nobody would even think of wearing a tasar for a social occasion. But in the last five-six years, tasars are coming out in many colors. It is the in thing to wear a colored tasar now for prestigious social occasions. They are quite expensive too, compared to same-colored cotton saris. They are sometimes as expensive as a well-embroidered jamdani. So price-wise Sabita would be able to maintain the balance between her and her mother-in-law.

The story of Sabita Basu brings to light the cultural/spatial opposition ruling the aesthetic scene in the city. The taste of people with a"northern" cultural background (such as Sabita) is at substantial disagreement with that of the "southern" culture. The former is largely ruled by a code of dressing that retains its connection with rules prescribed by ritual and religion (wedding associated with red, light colors associated with aging), while the latter seeks to mark itself off from that "tradition" by invoking the language of "personal style"(Sabita's sister-in-law not wanting to wear red on account of being bored with it). Style also includes a command over specialized knowledge (such as the density of the embroidery on a jamdani sari). The diverse readings of

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the same sari, the coexistence and interaction of "tradition" and "modernity" in the market is an outcome of the history of "modernization" in Bengal.

Binoy Basak is presently engaged in showing saris to Rekha Sinha. She lives in Jodhpur Park. Her in-laws own a house and she and her husband live with them. She is about twentyeight years old and has been married almost four years now. Her husband works as an engineer for the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation. They do not have any children yet. Rekha teaches part-time at a montessori school near her home. She passed her bachelors with honors in English literature from Brabourne college. She met her husband through a girlfriend of hers; he was her maternal uncle's son(mamato dada). The initial period of their courtship passed through the usual difficulties. Her parents were not at all favorably disposed toward their daughter wanting to marry someone on her own, least of all toward the fact that he was from another caste. They were Bhattacharyas, one of the highest castes among the Brahmins. Rekha's father was a very conservative Brahmin. He was an executive in a nationalized bank and quite well-educated. He had acquired a masters in economics from a very prestigious college in Calcutta. Her mother was also quite educated for a woman of her age. She had gone to school in Shantiniketan and sings Rabindrasangeet very well (had her lessons from Shantideb Ghosh and personally knows

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Kanika Bandopadhyaya and Suchitra Mitra). Both her parents are from Brahmin families and are originally from West Bengal (as opposed to Rekha's parents-in-law who migrated to India after the partition and settled in Calcutta). Though her mother, with her Shantiniketan style liberalism was not much opposed to the fact that her son-in-law-to-be is from a lower caste, her father was very much opposed to it. Her parents had always encouraged their children in their education and acquisition of Culture : Rekha has had private lessons in vocal Indian classical music and in playing the Sitar. However, the children have never had much freedom in terms of making their own friends. Rekha was not allowed to go to Presidency college, even though it is one of the most prestigious colleges in India and her high school passing grades were high enough to qualify her, because it was a coeducational college.

Rekha has a sizable collection of saris and she is quite proud of it. She is confident of her own good taste and always shops from places where she can have a good choice. Actually she is not a regular at Binoy Basak's shop. She shops mostly from Kundahaar. The owners of Kundahaar are prominent people in the world of Rabindrasangeet. Rekha came to know them through a friend of hers who has taken lessons in Rabindrasangeet in the school where they teach. Though some people say that Kundahaar-saris are always too highly priced, Rekha

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believes that one has to pay a price to get something good. She does not really shop around much. Some people take a pride in knowing sari-prices and particularly enjoy shooting down anyones claim that they had had a fair bargain on a sari. Rekha's husband's maternal aunt's daughter(mastuto didi) is like that. Whenever she spots Rekha wearing a new handloom sari she makes it a point to ask for how much she bought it. And no matter how reasonable the price may be for that particular sari she would invariably claim to have seen either just the same sari or one very similar selling at a lower price somewhere else. Rekha always tries to avoid going out buying saris with her because her penchant for bargaining often embarrasses Rekha. So far as Rekha herself is concerned, she is confident of the quality, variety and specialty of saris at Kundahaar. Her confidence is derived largely from the fact that the owners are "cultured" people associated with the music world.She has developed a good relation with the lady (the wife of the Rabindrasangeet singer) and has heard from her how they were the first to introduce the idea of Dhakai designs among the Tangail weavers. They have their own special dealer who gets them the best of the Tangail saris. This dealer, by the name of Balaram Saha, gives out contracts to a few select mahajans who then gets the saris made specially for supplying to Kundahaar. Though they also keep Shantipuris and Dhanekhalis, their primary

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business is in Tangail saris. The lady and her two daughters-in-law personally choose from the saris their dealer brings to them. That way the aesthetic quality of each sari is completely ensured. In her experience, Rekha has so far found that she always could get very attractive design and color in saris there, and she has never really questioned the price.

This morning she was at Binoy's shop with a neighbor of hers who runs her own small business from her home and buys wholesale from Binoy. While she was there, she decided to look at a few saris anyway just to see the kind of saris he keeps. She was looking at a blue silk sari with a woven designed border in a shade of warm brown. It was an unusual combination. The texture of the sari was somewhat unusual too. It had a kind of light, crispy, silky and slippery feel. The shop-owner (she does not really know his name. All she knows is that he is a weaver from Fulia) told her it was a chiffon-Tangail, one of the new type of saris they were bringing out from Fulia. Rekha was quite amused at this hybrid categorization. They think they can sell by adding fancy words like "chiffon" to the products! Rekha knows better not to be taken in by such grandiose names. She must admit that the design was nice, though nothing very unusual. One finds lot more interesting designs at Kundahaar. And Rekha does not trust a weaver fellow not to cheat her at the price. She knows she is not knowledgeable

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enough to judge saris for their prices. So the only people she trusts are people she knows within her own social circle. She watched another woman choose a sari which the sales-person referred to as a Katki-Tangail. Its border was woven in the famous Katki design from Orissa. But then, Rekha thought, why add the name Tangail to it? Does that make it more or less than a Katki? She has seen saris with Katki border at Kundahaar, but there it is not given any special name. There were other kinds of silk saris which the sales people called Katan-Tangail. Rekha knows of Katan-Benarasi which is woven in silk and has a very smooth texture. These silks have the same texture; she assumed that that was the reason for the name. In fact, Rekha noticed with some amusement that in this shop many different kinds of names were being bandied around as if that made each sari a special kind. Other women may be taken in by such fancy names, but she was more sophisticated than that. Kundahaar does not attach such names to saris. Their saris sell for their quality and taste. Rekha looked at a few other saris. The saris were reasonable, but nothing special.

Rekha embodies a subculture within the <u>bhadralok</u> culture that historically produced itself as a negation of the nineteenth century <u>Babu</u> culture on one hand and a complete westernization on the other. This culture grew around the larger-than-life figure of Rabindranath Tagore

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who tried to produce an aesthetics by putting together parts of traditional ritual acts [e.g. alpana, or the art of making patterns on the floor and the pindri (low sitting stools) as part of religious rituals] with translated western cultural forms (staged plays, wrote "secular" songs, "social" novels, "modern" poems). In the latter part of his life he attempted to give an institutional form to his style and established a school called Shantiniketan. This avant-garde style came to mark "high culture" among the Bengali bhadralok community. Specially, songs written by Tagore were rapidly institutionalized as Rabindrasangeet(songs of Rabindranath) through various schools that gave lessons in this particular "style" of singing and produced a group of people who shared a certain aesthetic of life-style. Rekha's connection with the people owning the shop Kundahaar is a cultural connection within that history. This connection distinguishes Rekha from Sabita. The latter, though a bhadramahila, comes from a different "class" as compared to Rekha. Rekha's condescending attitude toward the act of "naming" saris in Binoy Basak's shop indicates her allegiance to an "aristocracy of culture", to use a characterization by Bourdieu (1984), which legitimizes its own superiority by claiming "knowledge" of an "essential" nature, an essence that it construes as "violated" when taken apart by way of naming them.

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Rekha's neighbor, Jaya Ghosh, buys wholesale from Binoy for her home-business. She usually comes on Tuesday mornings, so that she gets to check the new lot that Binoy brings in on Tuesdays. She finds Binoy's saris quite saleable. Though she knows Binoy always marks up his saris by twenty or thirty rupees more than the price at which he can sell, she also knows that clever bargaining can always bring the price down here. Binoy is an old-hand at this game. He marks up his prices for innocent buyers who do not know much about prices, but is quick to see who is knowledgeable and keeps them pleased by bringing down the price after an initial show of resistance. Jaya enjoys playing the game. It gratifies her when she can buy a sari at twenty rupees less than the asking price, thereby proving to herself that her judgment of price is right. This is one reason she does not go to big names like Kundahaar or Mira Basu's or Tuntuni, where she cannot bargain even though she knows prices are marked up. Those shops are for snobbish people like Rekha, who believe anything
they are told at such places and pay an exorbitant price for a sari they can easily get somewhere else for atleast twenty rupees less. It is not as if their saris are that special. Jaya had been to Balaram Saha's(the dealer for Kundahaar) place one day. Even he charges such exorbitant prices! After all where does he get his supply from? From

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the weavers, is it not? Jaya is quite satisfied to have found Binoy Basak. Her saris sell well. Also she believes she has been able to establish some special relation with Binoy. Binoy calls her mashima(mother's sister) and sometime shows her saris which are of brand new designs and which he has not put on display yet. She appreciates Binoy's polite behavior. Even though he is a tanti he does not really behave like a "villager". He always takes his time to show saris to people. Can you expect such treatment from places like Kundahaar?

Jaya Ghosh represents a "class" among the bhadraloks who distinguish themselves from the "cultural elites" like Rekha (she thinks Rekha is snobbish) by claiming access to alternative sources of "knowledge" (she thinks she "knows" saris better than Rekha and can therefore do without the special knowledge of the people of Kundahaar). The differential in reading can in this case be interpreted as a strategic act of producing distinction in a world where an orthodoxy (Kundahaar) is constantly being challenged and thereby reproduced as such by a heterodoxy (Jaya's reading of Binoy Basak's saris). The openness in the world of interpretations of Tangail saris is the site for a battle between different classes trying to produce themselves by producing classifications.

Lily Mukherjee is another bhadramahila who runs her own business from her home in New Alipur. She is about

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fifty years of age and has two sons. She was married at a young age (when she was only seventeen) and both her sons are grown up now. One of them is a marine engineer and lives away from home most of the time. The other one is a cost accountant. He is married and lives with his wife in the same house. Lily Mukherjee got into the business after her second son got married. She became relatively free from various household duties(her daughter-in-law has taken over the job of looking after her son. With her son's income, they can now afford two maids, so there is very little household work to do either). She too started out her business by buying wholesale from Binoy Basak, but then switched her allegiance over to another weaver who one day visited her house with some samples of his saris (reference was from one of her relatives).

Lily was becoming a little dissatisfied with Binoy because she had recently lost several customers who did not buy her saris on the ground that they have already seen many such saris. They probably would have bought if Lily brought her price down substantially, but that would cut too deeply into her profits. Also, it would have given her a bad name. If you bring down your prices too readily, you become typified as one who always marks up her stock.

Today Lily was showing saris to two of her neighbors. In this <u>para</u> she and another woman down the street were the two who ran this business. Lily, being the older of the

two, has a better network in the *para*, though the other woman is building up her network fast through the music school she runs. Though their competition is not openly expressed, Lily these days is very careful about the kind of saris she keeps and also makes it a point to chat to her customers about the important connections of the places where she gets her saris from or which important people (like the wife of the minister of finance of the state) she has had as her customer. Today she was telling these women that the wife of the minister of finance has praised her collection for being as good as Mira Basu's. Balaram Saha calls her *didi* and has a standing agreement with her to supply her with some of the designs he supplies to Mira Basu. Thus the specialty and exclusivity of her collection is unquestionable.

Apart from Tangail saris, Lily Mukherjee too has of late diversified her stock into Shantipuri and Dhanekhali. These saris are always cheaper than Tangails, for the reason of being coarser(*mota*). The weave of a Tangail is much finer and when new it comes with a kind of glaze that is not available in the other two. Moreover, Tangail saris are available in two different lengths, the more traditional five and a half yards and the fashionable six yards. These days many women do not want to buy saris that are five and a half yards, because that does not allow them to keep the *aanchal*(the part of the sari that hangs from

the shoulder) long in the fashion of the day. The variety of color and design in Tangail is of course acknowledged by everyone. Though these days Dhanekhali is coming up with some very interesting colors (though not so much in designs), they are still among the cheaper saris because of their coarseness.

Lily remembers when she was a young girl, Dhanekhalis were widely appreciated among Bengali women because of their compact weave. The distinction between mota(coarse) and mihi(fine) was not available within handwoven saris then. Handwoven saris all had a coarser texture as opposed to silk saris which were worn on social occasions to indicate status ranking. Though silk saris from Murshidabad were handwoven and so were Balucharis, tanter sari(saris woven on a handloom) was always used to refer to cotton saris of coarser texture for ordinary everyday wear. The distinction between silk and cotton that used to dintinguish tanter sari from fancy sari now cuts across the domain of handloom saris. Handloom saris are now classified as mihi(fine) and mota(coarse) and as silk and cotton. Tangail saris have now come to occupy the top rank of the hierarchy among handloom saris and in special cases (such as in jamdanis) are sometimes ranked higher than printed silks or even handwoven silk with woven borders.

But it is precisely in having captured the more prestigious market that Tangail saris have lost a large

market to Shantipuris and Dhanekhalis. During the marriage season, when people buy saris as gifts, on an average they tend to stick to the lower priced ones than the more obviously prestigious ones. Of course lots of expensive handloom saris sell too during this season, but it is always a lower percentage. Moreover, the lower classes (specially the maids) have taken to wearing handloom saris on special occasions in imitation of the bhadraloks. But they cannot usually afford a good Tangail. When their employers buy saris for them as Puja gifts they too stick to the cheaper varieties of handloom saris. This is another large market for Shantipuris and Dhanekhalis. Furthermore, young college going girls often wear less expensive Dhanekhalis as a sign of "fashion for young girls" constructed in opposition to "fashion for ladies" which tend towards the more expensive and gorgeous types. The opposition is thus between youth:maturity ::gorgeous:simple ::inexpensive:expensive :: less:more. The cultural logic underlying these oppositions is the distinction between a meye(girl) and a bhadramahila(woman), where the line is roughly drawn at marriage. A girl attains womanhood or feminine fullness with marriage. Traditionally a girl would be given to marriage before attaining puberty or immediately thereof, a practice still largely prevailing among the "lower classes". An unmarried woman past her puberty was arakshania(the unprotectable female). Though it

is not quite clear as to what needs to be protected, it can be reasonably assumed that the reference is to female sexuality or feminine energy. The "feminine fullness" that a woman attains within the protection of "marriage" is thus different from the western concept of sexual maturity that distinguishes between a girl and a woman. Feminine sexuality needs to have the "protection" of a marriage in order for it to confer fullness to a female, make a woman out of a girl. A woman is thus more than a girl by virtue of being married, not just by her age. Traditionally, there corresponded to this distinction a certain age-division. This, however, is no longer true of the present times. Though a large majority of Bengali women get married in their early twenties, a distinction in terms of feminine fullness between a female of twenty and another of twentyfour is hard to make. Hence in present day colloquial Bengali a confusion, or, to quote Bourdieu, "a fuzziness of logic" is often perceived in the characterization of a female body. A married woman in her late twenties who looks rather slim and youngish may be referred to as a meye, while another married woman in her early twenties who is heavier may be referred to as a bhadramahila. In a social situation one sometimes hears people debating whether to call a woman a meye or a bhadramahila. While often the ostensible criteria of distinction is the fullness or maturity of a woman's body, if one listens closely to the

adjectives used one finds that the indigenous concepts corresponding to "fullness" are closer in meaning to a certain "gravity of presence" or to a kind of "heaviness of countenance" (bharikki chehara), both of which meanings construct a meye as a lack, a negative presence. A bhadramahila is more complete in the sense of being inwardly full or heavy. This structural opposition is used in practice in women's dress where a meye constructs herself socially by dressing in saris which are "simpler" and thereby "less" than a woman's sari. Of course, practically speaking, the consumers are only conscious of a particular situation, and not of the structural opposition. In two different situations, which are equivalent, to quote Bourdieu again, to two different "universes of practice", the same logic may generate entirely different practices according to the universe.

The two women Lily Mukherjee were showing saris to were a mother and a daughter. The daughter has just started going to college. Like many college-going girls of today, she commonly wears salwar-kurta and sari only occasionally. Today they were at Lily Mukherjee's place to choose a sari for her as a special gift from her mother to her for the Pujas. The girl, Sushmita, liked a cotton Tangail in prussian blue background with a very wide woven border in sky blue. Her mother, however, objected saying that it is a very "oldish","grave" (burote) sari. Wider border suits an

older/heavier woman, whereas a young girl (bachcha meye) like her should choose a sari with less design on it, with a narrower border. Her mother liked a pale green Dhanekhali with a narrow border in bottle green for her. Finally that is the one they bought at Rs.80. Though the mother tried to bargain it down to seventy by claiming that Tantuja was selling these saris for seventy and that she has come to Lilydi(elder sister Lily) because she has known her for so long and with the confidence that Lilydi would never ask for an unjustifiably high price, Lilydi turned the table on her by accepting the status of an elder sister and insisting that truly as an elder sister she cannot ask for an unjust price. The price asked for is the just price. Lilydi does not know how Tantuja sells their saris so cheap, but one should be careful about too cheap things. Lilydi gets her saris directly from a weaver. She even goes to the village to get her supplies from him and, honest to God, she is not asking for anything but the just price.

The other day Lily Mukherjee was showing saris to another woman by the name of Shyamali Dutta. She is about fortyfive years of age, married with three children and works as a teacher in a high school. When she dresses to go to school, she always wears saris in either white or very light colors with wide borders. Though she sometimes wears printed cottons, most of the time her school-going dress is handwoven saris. Handwoven saris carry a weight that

printed saris do not. They(prints) are mostly meant for young girls who do not have to be so status conscious. A kind of levity and relative lack of status is associated with prints. Sheela reserves her printed saris only for purposes of shopping or for visiting relatives (if it is a day-time visit) on ordinary occasions, or for going to school on very hot days. She remembers when she was a young girl growing up in Bhabanipur(that is where south Calcutta begins) her mother and aunts would never wear printed saris because only "basanwalis wore them". Basanwalis were all women vendors from western India who used to do business in steel and aluminium utensils. They would exchange these new utensils for used saris (or other clothings) that were in good shape. These women would always wear printed cotton saris, and printed with big flowery patterns in garish color at that. The others who wore printed saris were women from northern or western parts of India who worked at many kinds of menial jobs. The bhadraloks came into contact with them in their everyday life as sweepers or workers at construction sites.

The hierarchical opposition between handwoven and printed sari thus derives from a history. In this case, Shyamali Dutta was apprehending the particular situation in terms of the basic opposition of girl:woman :: less:more and thereby making the historical opposition of handwoven/printed a meaningful one in practice. In the

particular "universe" she was functioning in, the universe of "Bengal", the historically derived meaning of the hierarchy was displaced into signifying the opposition between girl and woman; printed:handwoven :: less:more :: girl:woman.

Thus the same opposition generates two different practices, in one case a choice of a Dhanekhali over a Tangail, in another a choice of a handwoven over a printed.

I started out by asking the question of the "gaze" of the consumer that produces a commodity, in this case a Tangail sari. **The** gaze, as it turns out, is of a very fragmented nature. The process of modernization in Bengal has given rise to a differentiated culture where different oppositions are brought into play by different historical agents with different trajectories. The outcome is that in the market a battle is waged for appropriating the sign of Culture by different agents positioned differently in the network of social relations: such as the owner of Damayanti who draws upon the legitimacy of the repositories of Culture such as Kundahaar (she gets her supply from Kundahaar's dealer); Binoy Basak who, lacking that legitimacy, uses the tactic of "naming" saris and using rituals to keep open the "fund of knowledge" about saris (people go to Binoy in the hope that he may have something "new" that is hidden), and Kundahaar itself, signifying an

essentialism associated with cultural aristocracy.

The practices described above bring to light what Bourdieu calls "heterodoxy" in the market of Tangail sari in Calcutta. Bourdieu defines heterodoxy as a situation where a doxic mode of social practice is challenged by contesting modes that seek to legitimize themselves by practically constructing an alternative system of classification. To quote Bourdieu: "The truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a field of opinion, the locus of the confrontation of competing discourses --- whose political truth may be overtly declared or may remain hidden, even from the eyes of those engaged in it...".[1] The very existence of contesting interpretations of similar objects points to the fact that there is constantly an attempt at challenging some established mode of interpretation of meaning of saris, and with that a classification of the social world. The doxa that each heterodoxic reading challenges by calling it orthodoxy (or the heterodoxy that a particular doxic interpretation brings to existence and thereby produces itself as orthodoxy) is revealed only in relation to the heterodoxy. The sub-cultures contained within the general culture known as the bhadralok culture represent heterodoxic positions in relation to it. In the next chapter I shall go on to inquire the specifics of the cultural composition of some of these sub-cultures as

represented by particular women engaged in this social field.

ENDNOTES:

1. Bourdieu, P. 1977 Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, page 168.

CHAPTER V

HOW TO BUY A TANGAIL SARI: A GUIDELINE IN THE FORM OF STORIES.

Where does one spatio-temporally locate a "market" and a "commodity" in that? In this chapter, I shall be concerned with the question of the "Tangail sari" as narrated by the buyers as a lived-experience in the context of their social lives. The point I want to make here is that, beyond its obvious materiality, a commodity has to be located in the experience of the buyers if one does not want to lose sight of the many-faceted social relations that are constitutive of the various meanings of the commodity.

The bhadramahilas, the urban-middle class-Bengali women, are the tellers of the stories that are recounted below. The narratives were collected by means of interviews with several bhadramahilas selected to represent a range of age, economic, and status differences that are found to exist among the city women. Surely there is an element of randomness in the selection and all the possible differences have not been represented. The randomness, however, does not weaken the main point of the chapter, that the meaning of the commodity varies with the way

in the socio-economic network. The differences one finds in these stories bring to light several cultural-historical categories that structure perception of everyday life in the city. Cultural practices of consumption of the commodity, in the sense of conferring a meaning to it so that the meaning is transferred to the self, thus throws light on the politics of everyday life for the modern Bengali women in Calcutta which at the same time illuminates the meanings constitutive of the commodity. The accounts are reproduced below in the voice of the women themselves as they spoke to me (and as I took it down in my constant companion notebook), though I have deleted my interruptions in the flow of conversation.

Stories of Tangail Saris

Suprobha Ghosh is a woman in her mid fifties. She had been married quite young compared to the normal age of marriage for women in the present days, at fifteen. Her parents used to live in Khulna in what is now Bangladesh. They crossed the border to the safety of a Hindu state in 1947 and settled in Jadavpur in Calcutta. Her father, perennially worried about having to marry off four daughters (Suprobha has three younger sisters) married Suprobha off as soon as he found what he thought was a satisfactory match for her. Her husband was a man from a refugee family like them and at that time he was working

for a government office in the position of a junior clerk. Her husband's family was comparatively better off than theirs in that they (her in-laws) had migrated a few years before the rush of the refugees started and also had some relatives in a well-off position in Calcutta. They were already living in a rented apartment near Bhabanipur (her father-in-law was still working) and not in a refugee colony like her parents. Suprobha's match was made in spite of their comparatively lower economic status because her natal family came from a good kula and bangsa and her father-in-law was not too keen on a high dowry. As a matter of fact, the kinship alliances her family made through her marriage facilitated the marriage of her three younger sisters.

This biographical sketch of Suprobha places her, for our purposes, in the category of an "older woman" (bayoshka mahila). For the purpose of a sociological analysis, this implies that her experience with the commodity handwoven saris dates back to the days when it still was not a fashion-item, when women were not as much of "subjects" when it came to choosing their saris (this will be made evident in Suprobha's commentary), when the relation between the buyers and the sellers of saris was less anonymous and commercialized (which makes Suprobha's perception of the meaning of a handwoven sari different from her young daughter-in-laws), when the limits and

ranges of ones social network was construed in terms of some cultural-spatial categories that derived from a rural world-view (such as the samaj and the para, both of which concepts will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter). From Suprobha's account we also get some idea about the aesthetic judgments of an older woman about saris (such as her preference for sturdy ones as opposed to the fancy ones).

In Suprobha's words: Back in East Bengal I remember my mother used to wear mostly white saris with colored borders. I was too young to know or remember what saris those were. All I know is that those were cotton saris. But about whether those were Shantipuri or Tangail or Dhanekhali I had no knowledge. And anyway after we came over here we were too poor for her to really have any interest in fancy saris.

After I got married and moved to Bhabanipur, I had more saris than I had at my parent's. But we, the women of the house, almost never got to choose saris for ourselves as young women do these days. My father-in-law disliked women's going out in the city just like that. Not that we were all pardanashins (women who live behind the purdah), but I remember whenever I went out it was in a group of women on some special purpose like attending a wedding or some other ritual at one of our relatives (attiya sajan). We used to get saris as gifts twice a year, once on poila

baisakh (the first of the month of Baisakh, the first month in the Indian calendar) and the second time on the Pujas (the most important religious-social festival in Bengal held in autumn). On both occasions we, that is all the bous (brides/wives) of the house, would get saris as gifts from our shoshur-moshai (father-in-law). Of course each of our husbands contributed to the common fund with which the saris were bought (and that often led to discrepancies in the distribution causing some tension among the bous), but it was my father-in-law who went to the East Bengal Friend's Society (one of the older shops in Bhabanipur) each time it was time to buy saris for us. That was our bandha dokan (regular shop). The owner knew my father-in-law well. In fact, even to this day, I visit their shop when I want to buy something on my own. They do not keep a stock of fancy saris, but their saris are always very majbut (sturdy). My father-in-law would choose the saris (always with some instructions from my mother-in-law) and then have them send those over to our house. Most of the saris would be mill-produced, others were Shantipuri or Dhanekhali cotton handloom saris. In those days Dhanekhali saris were considered the good ones. I still believe that. All these new Tangail saris are so flimsy. You don't find the older quality in saris these days. That day I went to buy a sari with my daughter-in-law to one of those shops at the Deshapriya Park Hawker's Corner. First of all it is

amazing the prices they charge for saris these days. We wanted to buy a woven border cotton Tangail. I believed we could get some for about 120 or so, though my daughter-in-law warned me I was going to be frustrated. They did have some woven border cotton handloom saris for that price, but they were of such poor quality! I remember the Dhanekhali saris we used to wear were of such compact weave you could wear them for years. I could clearly see these saris would not last even a couple of years. That is how these people make money these days. One has to keep buying saris because they wear off so easily. The salesman told us that for that price we would get Shantipuri saris but not Tangail. How is one to know? There are no honest shopkeepers these days anyway. They are all crooks. I am an old woman now and do not have to go out much for sari shopping, so I am spared all the trouble one has to go through to buy a reasonably good sari, not to speak of the price one has to pay. My daughter-in-laws all go out shopping to buy their own saris, and they also buy for me. I do not know much about where they buy from. All my knowledge is from listening to them. They go to Gariahat market, or Kalighat market, or Deshapriya Park Hawkers'Corner. That day my youngest daughter-in-law was talking about a shop called Damayanti that has opened newly on Rashbehari Avenue, she was saying they have some good collection. This daughter-in-law of mine likes to dress up. She also has a job, and my belief

is that she spends most of her earning on saris. These Tangail saris of today are surely very colorful, and they come in many more new designs (if you ask me, I do not like all of them). In our days we did not have such variety. But it is only in the variety, the saris are not of as good quality as they were before. That day one of our neighbors came to visit us. Visiting was just a pretext. Actually she came to tell my daughter-in-law that she was going to start a business of selling Tangail saris and wanted my daughter-in-law to buy saris from her. Some of our relatives have started this sari-business too. The problem with so many of your relatives and neighbors being in the business is that you are almost obliged to buy from them. My daughter-in-law is trying to avoid this neighbor. We do not like her much. But after all she is a neighbor, one cannot entirely sever all connections with her. We have to live in a samaj (can be glossed in English as "society", though in cultural specificities the indigenous concept is somewhat different from society). You have to keep up some samajikata (sociality). I have advised my daughter-in-law to buy only the cheapest saris from her, the type we have to give as gifts to distant relatives and maid servants during the Pujas.

Mondira Sanyal is a housewife twentyeight years of age. She lives with her husband (her in-laws live with the

elder brother of her husband who works in a very good position at a mercantile firm and is posted in New Delhi) and a daughter in Ballygunj near Golpark. She has grown up in Calcutta. Her father was a medical doctor and they lived on Ballygunj Circular Road. She had had her schooling at Gokhle Memorial Girls' School and subsequently at Ashutosh College. Though their own family was a nuclear family they kept up regular interaction and exchanges with most of their relatives. Their house, being a very spacious one, was very frequently a center for family gatherings, for ritual and other purposes. Her mother was a very "social" woman (in the familial sense,i.e., she played all her roles withing the family-kinship network perfectly). Thus Mondira grew up with a strong sense of familial propriety. She had an arranged marriage. Her pishi (father's sister) made the match for her. Her husband's family lived in the same para (neighborhood) as her pishi. Everyone in the family was happy with the match. It was a perfect match in terms of bangsa and kula, and on top of that her husband was a cost accountant. Their family was not a "modern" one, i.e., they preferred their women to have an arranged marriage (where the girl's parents and relatives negotiate the match) instead of a "love-marriage" (where the bride and the groom choose each other on their own).

Mondira thus represents the sociological type of women of a younger generation to whom the complex world of

handloom sari market is a "natural" one. Her family background (natal and affinal) can be described as "average middle class", in the sense that their style of living and social interactions conform more to the style that accepts the existing as given than to a style that distances itself by using some special knowledge (what Bourdieu would call "symbolic capital"). Her interpretation of the differences in the meanings of saris from different shops is made more in terms of her ability to find the right bargain, than in terms of some absolute value of some saris that derives from some knowledge of "history and tradition", which is the symbolic capital of the elite. However, even though she is of a younger generation than Suprobha, some of the meanings of social relations derive from the same categories that Suprobha uses (such as para. Some of her peers when it comes to sari-buying come from her para-connections). This brings out some of the continuites of cultural perceptions between the older and the younger generation.

In Mondira's words: When I buy handloom sari I always buy Tangail. Shantipuri and Dhanekhali are cheap quality saris. Actually I enjoy shopping for saris. We, that is my two nanads (husband's sister) and my jaa (husband's younger brother's wife) who lives in Calcutta, usually go out together for sari buying. I usually buy my saris twice a year, on the Pujas and the Poila baisakh. These are also

the occasions when we all have to buy saris for each other, so going out together to buy saris almost becomes a family festival. Also when you are in a group you find it easier to bargain with the dokandars (shopkeepers). You have to really fight with them and have to have a loud voice. My nanad is very good at it. See, this chiffon-Tangail my nanad presented me with last Puja? I was with her when she bought it. It was from a sari-exhibition in her para, held by some tantis from Fulia. The man asked for Rs400. She simply turned her back on him and pretended to walk out. The man then called her back, saying: "didi (elder sister), wait,wait! Don't be so impatient with us poor fellows. How much do you want to pay for it?" She turned back halfway and said:"I will not pay one rupee more than 200. Is this some kind of a joke? Just the other day I saw some chiffon-Tangails of far better quality than this, and they were selling for 300. You don't even have enough design on it to merit 300." Of course, you understand, she knew they were not going to sell it for 200. But with these people you have to start by offering less than half the price they are asking for. Then only can you expect to have a settlement at a reasonable price. My nanad finally bought the sari at 325. If you are meek with these people they will just rip you off. And when we go out in a group we always go to such places where we can bargain. I don't believe it is any use going to big names like Kundahaar or Ananda. If you make

the effort of shopping around you can always find saris as good as theirs and you do not have to pay the exorbitant price they ask because of their name. Just the other day aunty-next-door (paasher barir maashima) was showing me a sari she bought from Mira Basu's shop. I have myself seen an almost identical sari at a Tantuja shop. Can you believe it, she paid 300 for that one? At Tantuja it was on sale for 275. That is the kind of difference that exists in the market! If you are not careful you will be had! Recently many women in our para have started their own sari business at home. There is a woman on our street, I call her Lolita pishi (father's sister Lolita), who had a sari-exhibition at her house the other day. She said she has contact with a tanti in Fulia who directly supplies her with saris. She had a good variety to show. The price was good too. Probably because she gets it directly from a weaver. I saw one plain dark blue sari with a border in peacock blue. It was gorgeous. Of course I always tend to favor dark colors. My jaa says I look older for wearing dark colored saris most of the time. Anyway, I could not buy that sari because another woman had already reserved it. Lolita pishi had asked her permission to keep it on display throughout the exhibition in case someone else wanted to buy that one. You see, Lolita pishi had only one of that kind, but she told me she could ask her weaver to weave some more of that one if I wanted to buy one. But she said then I would have to

pay her the price in advance. And also I would have to wait for sometime because she wants to collect some more orders for that sari before she asks her weaver to weave some more. The sari was really beautiful, but I did not want to wait that long. Having Lolita pishi selling saris has been very convenient for me. I can go over there any time and browse through her collection. Sometimes she calls me up to ask me to come over if she has received some new supply and thinks there are some I might like. She is very fond of me. It is not like buying saris from an unknown salesman who do not know anything about your taste. My nanad thinks Lolita pishi's prices are too high, but I don't agree. She keeps some very uncommon saris, and that will be a little expensive.

The aunty-next-door Mondira was referring to is a woman in her early forties by the name of Madhobi Sen. She too, like Suprobha, is a child of refugee parents. In fact, she was less fortunate than Suprobha in that her father had died even before they left East Pakistan. Her jathamoshai (father's elder brother) was already living in Calcutta where her mother found a maatha gonjar thai (a space barely adequate to rest ones head) for herself and her three young children. Madhobi's memory of her teenage days was not one

of comfort. Her mother had to do all the housework at the house in exchange for boarding,lodging and clothing for herself and her children and also some kind of schooling for the children. Madhobi remembers how her mother used to be constantly worried about getting her married for she had little or no property with which to start to negotiate a marriage. Madhobi herself was quite aware of the difficulty of the situation. When she was going to college (goes without saying, she was going to a girls' college) it was almost next to impossible to meet any young man. But fortunately, one of the friends of her elder brother started making frequent visits to their house, ostensibly to meet his friend, her brother. Her brother acted as a good camouflage for their brief courtship and Madhobi relieved her mother of her worries by getting herself married without any dowry. Her husband now works as a public relations officer in one popular Bengali Newspaper. Five-six years ago they bought an apartment near the Rabindra Sarobar Lake on Southern Avenue. She has a son eighteen years of age who, after completing his high schooling from Hindi High School, is now enrolled at St.Xavier's College. Both these schools are known for accomodating the children of the affluent of Calcutta, from both the Bengali and the non-Bengali section of its population. Specially the high school is marked for its anglicized culture, where most of the students take Bengali

or Hindi as their second language and know about Bruce Springsteen's latest album (but are disdainful of the "soppy" Bengali modern songs).

Madhobi represents the generation between the older generation (like Suprobha) and the younger generation (like Mondira). She tells the story of a time when handloom textile was more of a political symbol (in the conventional sense of the term) than a symbol of taste and fashion. She also represents a relatively "elitist" position (which also entails having a taste for comparatively expensive saris, thus bringing out the relation between an elitist taste and the economic situation of the elite) where she buys saris relying upon some kind of specialized knowledge represented by government institutions that sell saris.
She derives some of her legitimation for her taste in saris from the taste of film actresses, who are considered to be the symbols of fashion and taste in urban cultures. Her story also gives us an exposure to some of the cultural descriptions of feminine looks (such as when her sister defies social norms by wearing colored saris, and when she describes a dour look in a woman as looking like <u>pishima</u>).

In Madhobi's words: I did not use to wear much handloom sari until seven-ten years ago. Ten years ago handloom saris were considered "ordinary" sari. Nobody would even imagine going to any social occasion like a wedding or something like that wearing a handloom sari. The

only women who wore handloom sari in public were either political workers or social workers or unmarried women like school teachers or very lower class women. Those days if you had to go to a biye bari (a house-of-wedding) you would almost certainly wear a silk of some sort, either a Benarasi or a South Indian silk or a Patola silk. The idea was that one has to dress very gorgeously with lots of jewellery at a biye bari. One could wear a handloom sari if one was going to the bazaar, because you are not supposed to dress up if you are going to do your grocery. Anyway those days handloom sari meant only cotton sari. I remember before my marriage my jathamoshai would get only the cheap handloom saris as Puja gifts for us, and I had always longed for a silk sari.

I think handloom saris came into vogue with all the advertisements on the part of the government. They started putting out so many advertisements in all the papers and magazines. Atleast I always keep tab of all the important sari exhibitions from the Bengali magazines I subscribe to, such as Desh, Prosad, Ultorath. I never buy a handloom sari from shops that are not reliable. This temple border Tangail silk I bought last Puja from the exhibition Tantuja held at the Park Hotel (an expensive five star hotel on Park Street in central Calcutta). You can be sure to get quality saris from such places. All the important people go there. Do you know I saw Munmun Sen (a popular film

actress) buying sari from there? I stole over to where she was looking at saris just to see what kind of sari film actresses buy! Anyway, what I was saying, I always buy from such reliable places. Other places I regularly go to are Kundahaar and Ananda. First, there is no question about the quality of the sari there. Second, I think they keep a very good range of choices. I always get attracted towards uncommon colors, and they have one of the best range of colors in their saris. And mind you, these are not gaudy or unbecoming. A woman of my age cannot wear a bright pink or bright yellow, like young girls do. When I want to buy a handloom sari I always buy the better ones, I mean either a Tangail silk or a jamdani. Recently Ananda has brought out organza saris with woven Tangail border on them. I have bought one of those recently. I think if I am buying handloom saris there is no point in buying the ordinary varieties. For everyday necessities like going to the bazaar or the bank or to a movie one can always wear good printed saris. There are lots of those around now too . In fact, for rough use purposes those saris are the best. They are much easier to maintain. A Tangail sari has to be glossed at regular intervals in order not to lose its glaze through wearing. There is really no point in taking all that trouble for saris for everyday wear. But I must say handloom saris have risen in status. These days it is prestigious to wear a good handloom sari at a biye bari.

The other day I had attended my bonjhee's (sister's daughter) wedding wearing a katan Tangail. It was purple with pale pink woven border. Looks almost like a Benarasi[1]. There were many other women wearing handloom saris of various sorts, such as jamdanis, silk-Tangails, Katki-Tangails etc. These days people wear lot less jewellery than they used to. In fact, my sister, the bride's mother, wore a white silk-Tangail with an old style ganga-jamuna[2] border. My sister usually does not wear white saris, even though she has a daughter of marriageable age. In fact, people from her shoshur bari (father-in-law's house) often criticize her for dressing in such colorful saris at her age. But she is a spirited one. She says she does not want to look like a pishima (father's sister. Here the allusion is to the fact that in older days widowed women would sometimes come back to their natal home and live with their brother's family. Being widows, they would always dress very austerely. In all likelihood, their lives were not very happy ones, and that must have reflected on their countenance too. The suffix ma to the original word pishi for father's sister signifies her old age) just because her daughter has grown older. But on the wedding day itself relatives insisted that she wear a white and colored border sari, a colored sari would look too unbecoming. In earlier days, she probably would have had to wear an ordinary cotton, but now she has the option of wearing a graceful

Tangail.

Karuna Haldar is about the same age as Madhobi Sen. Her family is originally from Calcutta. She grew up in Bhabanipur. Her father was a clerk at the Writer's Building. Her marriage was arranged through the newspaper matrimonial column. Her husband works in a small position at the office of the Accountant General of Bengal. She has three sons, one of whom is a student at Maulana Azad college, the other two, twelve and fourteen year old respectively, are in high school. She lives with her parents-in-law in a small rented apartment in Shyambazar.

Karuna, unlike Madhobi, does not belong to the affluent middle class category. Both her father and her husband are low level bureaucrats in government offices and are thus economically much worse-off than Madhobi. Her taste in saris and her rationalization of her taste (in terms of buying from this place and not that) enables her to live within her means. Hers is another example of how economic means are justified in terms of taste.

In Karuna's words: I have worn handloom saris all along. In earlier days there were not all these different names in handloom saris, like this is Shantipuri, this is Tangail, this is Begampuri, this is Dhanekhali. They were all called tanter sari. And handloom saris were everyday-

wear saris. I remember I used to accompany my father to the Kalighat Hawker's Corner when he went to buy saris for my mother or other members of the family. Our budget was always tight, and I found my father bargaining very hard with the shopkeepers. He would usually be able to bring the price down by about five rupees or so. But there was not such great variety as you find today. My mother may sometimes mention a color of her choice to my father before he went off to buy, but on the whole she would accept any choice my father made. I remember she used to wear doore saris (a typically Bengali style of design where there are horizontal borders across the width of the sari all over its body) a lot. I think they were the ones mostly available. I know among her good saris she had one zari border sari which my grandmother had given her. She said it was a Shantipuri. But beyond that we never really cared what the name of a handloom sari was.

Where do I buy my saris from? Well, from anywhere actually. I do not buy saris that often. One time is the Pujas, when everyone buys. That is when the varieties come out too. Apart from that, I usually buy saris when I need one, when my old ones cannot be worn in public any longer. I usually do my shopping at the College Street market. That is closest to my home. In Gariahat you get more fashionable handloom saris, but it is too far. I had gone to Gariahat last year to do the Puja shoppings. You can hardly walk on

the pavements there on account of the crowd. I had gone with a neighbor of mine. We had to inch forward with the crowd. We had planned to look into the Select Stores. A relative of mine had told me I would find a good variety of Tangails there. She knows the owner of the shop and had assured me that the saris there are sold at a reasonable price. Also, she told me, knowing that I do not much care for all these new designs, that they keep a good stock of traditional-design saris. For one thing, I do not at all like the very wide bordered saris that everyone is wearing these days. I find those very heavy and hard to carry. The shop was very crowded. The salesmen were nearly suffocating in the crowd and in trying to cater to everyone. It took us some time to catch the attention of a salesman whom we asked to show us some narrow border Tangail sari. They did have some good ones, but they were quite expensive. I have seen Tangails of the same sort selling at cheaper at College Street market. I suppose things will be expensive at such fashionable places. Finally I did not buy. I am not the type who is very interested in fashion anyway. I am not a young girl anymore. I bought this pale blue one with a black border at College Street market instead. Just coming and going to Gariahat takes so much time when you are dependent on the public transport. And College Street market is not that lacking in variety either. You have to know where to look. I never neglect the roadside shops.

Sometimes I have found very good saris there. The other day I saw a very pretty mustard colored one with a brownish border. It was not very expensive either, just 120.

Shukla Ganguly is fortyfive years of age and lives with her husband and a daughter in their home in Kasba. Both she and her husband work in the same office, and they built this house with joint loans from their office. Her daughter, Minakshi, is a student at South Point High School in Ballygunj. Shukla had started working in this office immediately after she passed her bachelors. That was twentyfive years ago. It was not as common for women to take up a job in those days. Only women badly in need for income would think of going for a job in an office. However, at that time her father died leaving her mother with three daughters to support and no relatives to turn to for help. Under such desperate conditions, Shukla had to go out on the streets of the metropolis in search of a job (her mother did not have any educational qualifications for that). She met her husband at the same office when they were both transferred to the same department.

Shukla represents a "working woman", as opposed to all the other women we have met so far. Thus, the world she is exposed to is wider than that of a housewife. Her economic situation is better than some other housewives on account of the joint income in her family. Thus her taste in

relatively expensive Tangail saris also serves to signify her financial well-being. What is of interest for our purposes is to know the cultural signs she uses to make her "good taste" in saris meaningful for us. Her special knowledge, her symbolic capital, is legitimized in terms of her memory of the saris her mother owned. The cultural opposition she is making use of here is that of the unquestionable authenticity of the old versus the doubtful authenticity of the new. Knowledge that is acquired from the past is deemed to be a better guide in the modern day market that is full of traditionless-fashion. Shukla also makes a point of her knowledge of the distinctiveness of regional designs. Consciousness of regional differences within India and a desire to personify those distinctions through ones collection of garments (Shukla collects handwoven saris in different regional designs) is indicative of the exposure of the urban middle class to a wider range of ethnic differences, both in their everyday life and in the form of their access to cultural knowledge in the form of magazines, plays, films, exhibitions etc. This exposure is linked to the growth of both state and private sector investment in producing and disseminating knowledge about diversity of culture and custom all over the nation. Also the fact that she works, and therefore has to struggle in the city-traffic everday provides her with the rationale to use the distinction between "everyday

wear" saris and "good handwoven" saris for special occasions. The only kind of handwoven saris she buys are the "good" ones (which of course come with a higher price) for these are meant for special occasions.

In Shukla's words: I knew about Tangail sari long before all this craze started about Tangail. My mother had some very good Tangails. Tangail saris were good quality saris all along, only not many saris would cross the border to reach people on this side of it. Hence people here always raved about Shantipuris and Dhanekhalis. My mother was a very shaukhin (a person with keen aesthetic sensitivities) woman. She loved to dress in beautiful saris. When my father was alive, he regularly bought her good saris. In fact, Tangail saris those days were of a much finer quality than they are today. So I consider myself a kind of authority on Tangail saris.

You see, I have to come to work every day. So that way handloom saris are not very convenient for me. Maintaining them is hard work. You have to starch them, iron them, have them glossed regularly if they are to be in a decent shape. A handloom sari looks very bad on you if it is not properly starched and ironed. That is why for coming to work I usually stick to printed cotton or silk or synthetic saris. Specially synthetic saris are extremely suited for the rainy days. You know how Calcutta streets get flooded after a heavy rain! Printed saris also have to be ironed and

starched, but you do not have to be as careful with them as with a handloom sari.

So the Tangail saris I buy are always of the better quality, saris that I keep for social occasions outside of my working life. Such occasions are going to visit relatives or friends, going for a trip, going to a movie, attending a wedding (or some other ritual occasion) or going to some cultural programme. I make it a point to wear a good Tangail whenever I have to go somewhere of importance. A good handloom sari has an entirely different dignified kind of beauty that can never be had from printed saris. There is not only Tangail saris but handloom saris from other states. South Indian silk handlooms are just superb! Not to mention the Pune saris or Orissa handloom saris. That way whenever I buy a Tangail I buy something that is distinctive of Bengal handloom, so that I can have in my collection saris of different regional styles. I never buy those trendy modern designs you find on lots of common Tangail saris in the market. I always look for the typically Bengali design in the border, you know, the flower and creeper design, or the conch-shell design, or the lotus design. Or I buy <u>jamdanis</u>. Those have a prestige that no other sari can equal. The best place to find such authentic designs on Tangails are the government Handloom House shops. Personally, I prefer to go to the one on Lindsay Street. They have such a good collection there!

Also I am good friends with one of the ladies at the sales counter there. I go over there whenever I can get away from my work and browse over saris even if I have no intention of buying. She always takes care to show me if they have got any new sari in their stock. I found this steel gray Tangail with dark blue border in kalka design there. Is it not unusual? Another reason I prefer to buy from there is that I do not have to worry about quality. The market is flooded with saris. Everyone is wearing a "Tangail". But as I know most people cannot even tell the difference between a Tangail and a Shantipuri. There is no guarantee that you will get a real Tangail if you buy, say, from one of those shops at the Maidan market. All kinds of crooks sell saris there. Of course you get it at a cheaper price, but you will be lucky if you get a sari that will last you a year. Also most of those shops buy their saris at wholesale from Burrabazar (the center for wholesale transaction in Calcutta). Those are very common saris.

Other places I go to are some of those new sari shops that have come up on Park Street[3] recently, like Suruchi, Sakhi, Ateet etc. True, their clientele consists largely of Marwaris and Gujaratis, and so they specialize in kota saris, but they also stock some very expensive and very good jamdani saris. Now that it is fashionable to wear handloom saris all the rich Marwaris and Gujaratis have taken to buy the expensive varieties of Bengal handloom

saris. I have seen jamdanis ranging upto Rs 5000 at those shops. Some of those are somewhat tacky, but they have some good ones too. All these shops are within walking distance from my office, so it is very easy for me to visit. I try not to go to those Gariahat shops" like Adi Dhakeswari Bastralaya, Amrita Bastralaya, Select Stores, etc. They keep only the common type saris. You know, the ones with gimmicks, like having some mina" embroidery done within Dhakai butis. You buy a sari from one of those shops and the next day you will run into atleast three other women wearing identical saris. Actually I love good saris. They are my passion. So I take a lot of care when it comes to buying saris that will be part of my collection. I never go to just any shop to buy a Tangail.

Ranjana Choudhury is a woman in her late thirties. She teaches at a girls' school in Behala. Her father was a school teacher too. He used to teach at a boys' school near Deshapriya Park. After retirement he continued to practise his profession by providing private tutoring for high school students at home. The reason is primarily economic. He is about seventy years of age and is not in very good health. Ranjana is not married. Nor does she plan to marry in the future. She and her father (her mother died a few years ago and her brother lives separately with his wife) live in a rented apartment near Kalighat.

Ranjana represents a subsection within the category of lower income people among the bhadraloks whose style of consumption is intended to signify an ethical order derived from the political-historical context of the period of nationalist struggle. Politics of this period assigned a meaning to handwoven textile that sought to distinguish it from "luxury" that was associated with the consumption of imported or machine-made textile. Carried over to the present day, this same ideology denies Ranjana the buying of fashionable (and relatively expensive) handwoven saris. The ideology of that period was heavily loaded with ideals of self-sacrifice and abstention from pleasure. Thus Ranjana, professing her allegiance to this ideology (which is communicated to and legitimized for her through patriarchal social relations),
refrains from buying saris that are too fashionable or too colorful. From her brief biography above, we know that she lives in a rented apartment with her aging father in Kalighat. Kalighat is the name of a neighborhood in southern Calcutta which is inhabited by comparatively lower income people. Coupled with the information that she lives in a rented apartment and her aged father privately tutors students gives us some idea of their finalcial hardship.

In Ranjana's words: I do not really think much about saris. I am a school-teacher, with neither the money, nor the time nor the inclination to go around shopping for

saris. What did my mother wear? Well, nothing special, really. My father was very active during the nationalist movement. He worked for the Congress party those days. As a man of high ideals, he never approved of any luxury for any of us. That is how my brother got into trouble with him. When he got married my boudi (brother's wife) started to buy new saris and used to dress up all the time. My father could not stand all that. As far as I can remember my mother always wore the cheapest and the most simple saris. Yes, of course, she always wore handloom. My father used to buy her saris from the khadi gramodyog bhavan (the government sponsored shop for selling hand-spun and handwoven material). My father is very much opposed to all the gift-giving and showing off that goes on in social occasions like weddings. So he never allowed my mother to accept any invitation to any wedding or any other social events. That way my mother hardly ever went out of the house and there was no question of dressing up.

You see, I am not really the kind of person who can tell you much about saris. I wear cotton saris most of the time, either printed or handloom. No, I do not buy from the khadi gramodyog bhavan. Now-a-days it is a fashion to wear handwoven dress and khadi gramodyog caters to those fashion. There is no idealism in it any longer. I always wear saris in light shades. Dark and bright colors are not to my taste. Anyway I cannot wear bright colors when I go

to work. After all I teach there. I cannot go there dressed up like a college girl. Apart from going to school I do not really go to too many places. My father is not in good health. I try not to stay away from home for too long leaving him alone. Well, I am not like my mother who never stepped outside of the house. I do sometimes visit relatives or friends (but I try to avoid weddings) and I have to do the grocery and all other shopping for the two of us. I don't really have much to tell you. Five-six years back Tantuja opened a shop near the Behala market. Most of the time, which is not very frequent, I buy my saris from there. I don't really know the differences between Tangail, Shantipuri and Dhanekhali. I ask them to show me some saris within the range of 100 to 120 and I choose from that. As I told you, I try to avoid bright colored saris. Another reason I do that is that I am rather dark complexioned. Bright colors tend to enhance that. On the streets I sometimes see very dark women wearing very bright colored saris, specially young women (sometimes the older too). It is in very bad taste. One should know what becomes one. And also I never wear the very wide bordered saris that almost everyone seems to be wearing these days. Those are too showy. Oh yes, another place I buy from is our next door neighbor. Her husband used to work as a foreman in a factory which closed down. He still has not found a job. So she had to take up something to feed the family. They are

bhadraloks after all, so she could not just go out and take up a job as a bashon majar jhee (a maid servant who scours the pots and pans). Luckily Tantuja had advertised for some people who would be willing to sell handloom saris for commission, and she got one of those. She really has to work very hard for it. Now many people in our para (neighborhood) buys from her, but initially she had to go from door to door to beg people to buy from her. But atleast it saved her from the fate of becoming a jhee (maid servant). I sometimes buy from her.

Koyeli Majumdar is twentyfour years of age and teaches at the La Martiniere School for Girls. Her father works as a high executive in a nationalized bank and her mother writes a weekly column on recipes for traditional Bengali dishes and their adaptation into modern ways of life in the women's section in a popular Bengali newspaper. Koyeli went to Loretto High School and then passed her bachelors with honors in English literature from Lady Brabourne college. Koyeli is engaged to be married to her boyfriend who is currently going through medical school. Both their families are supportive of their relation and Koyeli's mother has started to have some jewelleries specially made to order for her wedding. They live in Alipur.

This biographical sketch for Koyeli brings to light

her, and that of her immediate family, institutional affiliations. Her father's occupation immediately places their family in the high-income category among the bhadraloks. Her mother's occupation, indicative of the increasing social interest in knowledge about "traditional" recipes, places her in the group of specialists of the object called "tradition". Her elitist background is clearly reflected in her schooling: Loretto High School is known to be one of the good schools for girls in Calcutta, both for providing high quality academic training and also for teaching their students to speak English fluently and in general to be familiar with a Western style of communication. This is not to mean that any student of Loretto comes out of there completely "westernized", but that as compared to some other schools in Calcutta where students get no exposure to a western style of communication, Loretto students come with a skill in western style communication which is considered a valuable social skill. This form of symbolic capital is used to signify ones high social status and is commonly found among the high-income elites among the bhadralok community. The fact that Koyeli is planning to marry someone of her own choice, a decision that is supported by her family, goes to show the acceptance of certain western values in her family. Also, the fact that she works (even though there is clearly no economic necessity) points to the same. By her

own admission, she does not habitually wear saris. From her account, we get a sense of the association of sari with a sign of mature femininity (from her story of her grandmother's reaction to her style of dressing, her mother's suggestion to wear a sari on the day of her job-interview). Like most young urban women of her age, she does not perceive handwoven saris through an aura of "history" and "tradition". To her, handwoven saris are characterised by their available variety, but she is not concerned with the question of the authenticity in variety in relation to some past.

In Koyeli's words: Saris! I don't wear saris all the time. Specially when at home. I feel lot more comfortable in salwar-kurta. My thakuma (grandmother on her father's side) is the only person who has complaints about it. She is from one of those very conservative aristocratic families, you know, where they always had to pull their ghomta (the end of the sari that goes over the top of the head as a sign of respect to elders) whenever they came face to face with any elder. She says that it does not become a dhingi meye (very grown up girl) to go about in such dresses of batachele (masculine person). I try to convince her that salwar-kurta is a woman's dress, but to her anything that is not a sari is not meant to be women's dress.

But I do wear sari when I go to teach. My mother

advised me to do this since she thinks sari makes one look a little older and that is necessary when one is going for a job. In fact she insisted that I wear a sari when I was called for interview for this job saying I will not be taken seriously enough if I wore a salwar-kurta. I think she is right. Sari adds some gravity to your look. I shall go on wearing salwar-kurta until I get married. Though Shubeer is really very liberal and never insists on my wearing a sari, I have a sense that his image of a bou (wife/bride) always wears a sari.

Yes, I do buy handloom saris. There are so many different kinds now. Actually I myself am not very knowledgeable about saris. I mean I have my likes and dislikes, but when it comes to actual shopping I always take my mother along. She is very knowledgeable about what kind of saris are available at which shop. Such as for handloom saris she always prefers to go to Kundahaar. They stock a very wide range of very tasteful saris. My mother knows the owner of the shop, Mridula Guha Thakurta, quite well. What I like is the very warm and relaxed atmosphere there. I do not feel like I have gone to a shop, you know, where all you do is pick your thing up, pay the price, and leave. The lady herself chats with you, the sales girls are very friendly and you can just browse through the saris. The saris are not kept on the other side of the counter. Some of the combination of colors I have found among their

stock are just wonderful. My mother is usually very fussy about quality and price. Even she never complains about their prices. One of the women in their house is also a TV news reader, so she performs as a very good advertisement for their saris. I had once bought a sari from there after I saw her wearing that on the TV. The other place I have gone to buy handloom sari with my mother are Handloom Expos. There one gets the chance to compare the Bengali handloom saris with handloom saris from other states. Also, one gets a discount at the Expos. To tell you frankly, I do not have much personal knowledge about saris. All my knowledge is borrowed from my mother. Why don't you talk to her?

Sadhona Majumdar, the mother of Koyeli Majumdar, is a woman in her mid-forties. Though both her parents are Bengalis, she grew up in Pune where her father was posted as an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer. Her mother came from a Brahmo family, and hence was well educated and also accomplished in other refined cultural skills, such as culinary. Sadhona's basic training in culinary skills is from her mother, who, as the hostess of many high level parties, often both surprised and pleased her guests' gastronomic senses by producing some little known but authentic Bengali dish. Sadhona was brought up to be a refined, educated and liberal woman fit to be married

to a man of of good station in life. Thus she was promptly married off as soon as her parents decided they have found the man for her in whose household she will be able to "be herself",i.e., practice her Cultural skills without any problems. She was married when she was twentytwo.

Sadhona, Koyeli's mother and the author of traditional Bengali recipes, represents that group of elites among the bhadralok who are directly linked to the history of the formation of a bhadralok culture through their affiliation with the Brahmo community who played the pioneering role in constructing a historical version of "modernity" in Bengal. Her mother belonged to a Brahmo family. The Brahmos were known for the refinement of their taste which they consciously cultivated as a sign of their group identity as opposed to the "Babu culture" of the nineteenth century[*]. Sadhona's explicit pride in her family heritage and her confidence in her knowledge and taste in saris signifies her conscious attempt to use this history to mark her social identity. In her account she lays emphasis on the authenticity of saris and marks some shops as more authentic than others.

In Sadhona's words: I have grown up watching my mother wearing many different kinds of saris, and all good ones. As an IAS officer's wife, she always had to be ready to appear in front of a public. She had some exquisite Dhakai jamdanis. Not the types you find in the market today. These

are not real ones. The authentic ones had a different style of embroidery. What the Tangail weavers are reproducing today are only the designs, the motifs. Wait, I shall show you a real Dhakai jamdani..... see, how the thread of the embroidery is placed between the warp and the weft, and not over them. She also had one Baluchari silk. It had designs of nawabs and elephants in its aanchal. I cannot remember seeing her wear Benarasis. I am assuming Benarasis were too gaudy for her taste. She had a few very nice Murshidabadi silk saris. Then she had some Kashmiri silks, some South Indian silks..... these are the ones that are coming to my mind off hand. But all this living abroad never made her forget her original culture. I remember once she greeted her guests, one of whom was the governor, in an authentic Bengali doore sari. It made her the most distinguished among all the ladies present. I know she had one or two Tangail saris in her collection. They were all cotton, with a narrow border of flower and creeper in one and a fish design in another.

In Calcutta today if one has to buy a good quality handloom sari one has to buy a Tangail, there is no question about that. But one has to be really careful about the quality. Everything that sells by the name of Tangail is not a Tangail. I can tell a Tangail by the feel of it, the smoothness of its texture, the glaze in its color. Now that the name has caught on, everyone tries to pass off a

handloom sari by the name of Tangail. And even in real Tangail saris there have been such a deterioration in the quality of designs! I will not be caught dead in some of the designs and colors I find some women wearing. Everyone is busy making money, nobody cares for the artistry of it, or the tradition behind the art. There are only a few places now where you can get some decent designs, where people are still sensitive enough to seriously think about design and color. I have known the people who run Kundahaar for a long time. I know they actually try to find out traditional designs and then give those to their weavers. The weavers have forgotten all their tradition. The other place where they do research on traditional designs is the Weavers' Service Center. Tantuja gets the designs from them and distributes it among the weavers. So I sometimes buy from Tantuja exhibitions too. But I strictly avoid going to all those mushrooming home-business in handloom saris these days. Everyone has latched on to some weaver or the other and everyone gets a regular supply of "Tangail" saris. Nobody really knows anything about who the weavers are, where they are coming from, or anything about the tradition of designs at all. I know of atleast one case where a woman unsuspectingly bought saris from a man who claimed to be a Tangail weaver. Then one day she had gone to Burrabazaar for some business of her own only to find her "Tangail weaver" buying his supply from a wholesaler there. In the

meantime the weavers are making good money by taking advantage of this demand. They do not care about tradition so long as they make money.

Archana Das is a woman in her late twenties. She lives in Naktala in Tollygunj with her husband, shashuri (mother-in-law), pishishashuri (husband's paternal aunt, i.e., her father-in-laws sister), bhashur (husband's elder brother), jaa (husband's brother's wife), deor (husband's younger brother) and a three year old son. Her father-in-law built this house with his pension money and died soon thereafter. Having passed his bachelors from the City College, Her deor has been searching for a job for the last couple of years with no success and has almost resigned himself to become a statistics (in the statistics of the rate of unemployment in the state). Her pishishashuri had been widowed at a very young age and has been living with her brother's family ever since. Her bhashur has a job as an accountant with a small business firm, and her husband works as a junior administrative officer in a government office. Archana was married when she was twentythree. Her parents lived in Rajabazar in north Calcutta. Her father taught at a school near their home. Both her parents are from this side of the border, though they are not originally from Calcutta. Her grandfather owned some land (and had also built a house on it) in Hooghly where he was from. Her father, when he was

young and high-spirited, had left his natal village to seek a better life in Calcutta. He financed himself through college in Calcutta by working as a private tutor. His occupation never left him, and he ended up as a school teacher.

Archana represents the lower income non-elites among the bhadraloks of Calcutta who draw neither upon the austere, abstaining ideology of nationalist politics (as does Ranjana) nor the self-congratulatory ideology of the Brahmos (as does Sadhona). Her natal family background tells us the history of the fascination that Calcutta held for non-urban Bengalis in the early part of this century. Many of the immigrants, however, never made it, economically, to the upper level of the bhadralok community. Archana's father is an example of that. As marriages among the bhadraloks usually are negotiated among families of similar economic status (along with criteria such as caste, compatibility of horoscopes), Archana's marriage brought her to one such family that belonged to the middle level of the bhadralok community. Archana'a account, thus, makes the saris meaningful in terms of their accessibility, given her resposibilities as a housewife combined with her dependence on public transport in the city (which signifies her economic means). She does not read the saris in relation to some "tradition" either, though, as most bhadramahilas, she is concerned about

getting good value for her money. For her, "good value" is associated with the Gariahat market which, as compared to Tollygunje (Gariahat:Tollygunje :: fashion:non-fashion) is a better place to shop.

In Archana's words: Tangail sari? It is available everywhere. I do not really have much preference about where I buy from. If I see a likeable sari and within the range of my budget, I buy it. I usually buy my year's supply of saris during the Pujas. That is the time when all the new varieties come out. I remember last year during the Pujas everyone was buying these pink and blue checkered saris with golden border. You could see that design anywhere you went, at the shops in the Naktala market, Gariahat market, Maidan market, everywhere. I bought one too. Then the year before that the craze was hajaar buti saris, you know, where they claim they have one thousand butis (dots) embroidered on the body of the saris. There were gradations in that, like hajaar buti (one thousand dots), teen hajaar buti (three thousand dots), paanch hajaar buti (five thousand dots), and the price went up accordingly. You have to have a good sense of judgement with these saris, or you would end up buying a hajaar buti for the price of teen hajaar buti. You have to be able to guess the number of dots by looking at the density of the dots. I always ask the salesman to unfold the sari for me so that I can have a look at the entire body. Sometimes

what they do is they embroider lots of dots on the part of the sari that comes up on top after being folded, and when you bring the sari home you find the rest of the body does not have the same density of dots. I usually shop at tha Naktala market or the Gariahat market. A couple of years back it was difficult to go to Gariahat from here. There was no straight public transport. I would have to take one bus from here to Anwar Shah Road, then change into another bus to get to the junction of Rashbehari avenue (there is the # 24/29 tram that takes you directly to Gariahat from the Tollygunj tram depot, but their service becomes very infrequent in the afternoon. At that time they do not get the office crowd, so they decrease the number of trams. But afternoon is the only time for housewives like us. In the morning there is so much housework to do. My jaa and I have to have the morning meal prepared for the men before they leave for office, and then again in the evening we have to cook the dinner), and then get another tram or bus to get to Gariahat. But a few years ago they started a minibus service that goes directly from Naktala to Esplanade via Rashbehari. So now we have to change only twice. It is easier to go to Gariahat. You find many more variety of saris at the Gariahat market. It is after all where all the fashionable women go. My jaa and I usually do the Puja shopping together. We are both equally energetic when it comes to buying saris. We look at saris at almost every

shop on Gariahat. One should not buy saris in a haste. Often you find the same sari selling at different prices at different shops. If you do not shop around you end up being taken in by the shopkeepers. And you also must bargain with them. They know people are going to bargain, so they ask a price that is double the actual price. You should never trust them. In fact I enjoy the bargaining part of it a lot. Together we check almost all the sidewalk shops on Gariahat. You can find so much variety that way. Last year during our Puja shopping we found jamdani, Dhakai buti, temple paar, katki paar, ganga-jamuna paar, neelambari, and so many others. We tend to avoid the big shops, like Dhakeswari Bastralaya and such others. I don't think we miss anything but paying a high price.

The stories about the "Tangail sari" told above are inscribed on various other stories. These stories are stories about a geography of the city, stories about identity derived from ones sense of belonging to a para, stories about the existence of a samaj and ones practical duties in it, stories about memories of different times (with reference to which the present times have a meaning), and many others. "A Tangail sari" can acquire many different meanings as it is narrativized within these larger narratives. I shall deal with these larger narratives in greater detail as I go on to tell the stroy

of the play of order and disorder in the space opened up by the image of a "Tangail sari". The point I want to make here is that, as is evident from the stories of sari-buying told by its different practitioners, a particular Tangail sari is open to many different readings given the social relations that are constitutive of the gaze of the reader. The fact that quite a few of the narratives stress vagaries of prices as a constitutive feature of the commodity speaks of their (the narrator's) attempts to instill an economic order in a world that keeps breaking boundaries of pre-existing categories. Though I started off with a concern to "locate" the commodity in the consumer's experience, it is evident from the style of narratives of the women that its location keeps slipping from the boundaries of their "experienceable" world. Such as when a lady finds her "Tangail" weaver getting his supply from Burrabazaar, thus adding another story to enhance the uncertainty of the meaning of the object and simultaneously widening the realm of "experience" that constitutes the meaning of the commodity. Or when Mondira Sanyal finds Lolita pishi selling Tangail saris, thus expanding and de-stabilizing her world of experience which she tries to order by invoking the economic principle. The meaning of the "Tangail sari" is thus in a flux, only to be captured as the woman tells her story about it to give shape to her experience.

ENDNOTES:

1. Woven silk saris with golden thread embroideries on them. These saris are woven almost exclusively by weaver in the city of Benaras in northern India and are popularly known as Benarasi saris. These were generally worn on occasions when women were expected to "dress up" (such as a wedding reception).

2. A border in a sari that is woven with two colored yarns (usually white and red, occasionally white and black). The pattern is one where the two colors are used to weave alternate colors of stripes on the border. The name, ganga-jamuna, signifies the name of two important rivers in India, Ganga and Jamuna. Most likely, the alternating stripes are imagined as the two rivers (atleast this is the explanation one of my informants offered me).

3. The meaning of "Park Street" as a place and the history of that has been discussed in the next chapter.

4. These shops fall somewhere between the shops selling the most "exclusive" and authentically traditional saris to the ones on the sidewalks selling the cheapest and "ordinary" saris.

5. A form of embroidery done by hand on the woven design. The form is usually round or square with a small dot of a different color inside.

6. A detailed and insightful history of the Brahmo movement in Bengal and its gradual formation as a "culture" can be found in David Kopf's book The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind (1979. Princeton University Press).

CHAPTER VI

HISTORY OF THE CITY AS TOLD THROUGH BUYING SARIS

The story of the Tangail sari is inscribed on a larger narrative, that of "Calcutta", as it is experienced by its inhabitants (of whom the author is one) and represented in their tellings of the story of the commodity. Of course the author's position here is simultaneously that of an insider and of an outsider. She is an outsider in her capacity of an author in so far as she is taking a position outside of her own historical experience in trying to integrate it with other's experiences and write about this third experience. What follows is this third experience.

The city can be experienced in many ways. One of which is through representations of it, written and pictorial. Geoffrey Moorhouse's book Calcutta: the City Revealed[1] has on its cover a photograph of a normally crowded Calcutta street in the area of Tollygunje (marked by the signboard Indrapuri which is the name of the busiest film-studio in Calcutta that is located in Tollygunje) to the far south of the city. A story is immediately told about the city in the picture: a story about its over-crowded condition, its still plying tram-cars, its congested traffic, its

old-style architecture indicating the history of a colonial past. The book was published in 1971, so one may read it as falling within the classificatory category of "modern history". Indeed, the book provides a very interesting and complicated story of "modernity" in a historical context.

The book is divided into several chapters, chronologically organized as "Ultimate Experience", "Imperial City", "Poverty", "Wealth", "Migrants", "Bengalis", "People, People", "Faded Glory", "The Petrifying Jungle", "The Road to Revolution", and "Zindabad", where he provides a general description of everyday life in the City, a short story about the history of the first British encampments in this area that ultimately grew into the interesting absurdity that is Calcutta today, the visions of abject poverty to be witnessed on the streets of the city, the almost embarrassing display of wealth that is found side by side with it, the enormous migrant population from other parts of the country that lends another dimension to the character of the city, the "natives" of the city and some of their cultural traits and its context, the sense of being smothered by people that one sometimes feels in the city, the failure of grandiose plans by British officials to improve upon the conditions of the city, some of the present cultural-social-organizational problems of the city today, a short history of the communist movement for which

this city has been a center in India and a revolutionary vision as the author imagines one day the poor and the oppressed in Calcutta rising against the injustice they have mutely borne for centuries and reclaim their human rights, in that order.

It is clear that the author is telling the story of the city from various angles which is meant to convey the chaotic diversity of ones experience of the city by organizing the chapters according to different histories of different people all of which is somehow contained in the everyday life of the Calcuttan. I, as another author of this same city, will draw upon some of these pictures painted by Moorhouse to make meaningful my experiences as a traveller in the space of the handloom sari market of the city.

The market for handloom saris in the city is not spatially bound in any ascertainable sense. Handloom saris are sold by many women all over the city from their private homes. They are also occasionally sold by peddlers. They are sold from exclusive boutiques as well as from make-shift shops on the sidewalks of the city. In between these two extremes are shops of various sizes and reputations which regularly sell handloom saris. There are the government owned handloom sari shops which collect their saris from the weavers' cooperatives in the villages and

sari- exhibitions organized by private business and government alike.

The above description clearly incorporates some signs of distinction that make it possible for me to list the shops as different instead of perceiving them all as spaces serving an identical function, that of selling handloom saris. Making distinctions among the shops implies perceiving a distinction in the commodity they are selling. The above description of categories, though incomplete and needing further refinement, developed in my perception of the space of market for handloom saris as I gathered many different stories about the existing varieties in the market for "Tangail" handloom saris. I am here representing my version of the story of this space by making use of the signs of distinction made by the tellers of those stories.

Mrs. Bhattacharya buys Tangail saris for her own use only from the exclusive boutique called Ananda on Russel Street, which opens up on ones right after about a hundred yards as one enters Park Street from the side of Chowringhee Road. As she told me, Ananda is one of the very few shops where they have a reputed designer knowledgeable in the history of Indian arts and crafts who makes designs only for them. So she is always confident of finding interesting and exclusive designs there. She lives in Alipur and uses her husband's chauffer-driven office car to

go there. But of course Mrs. Bhattacharya is not naive. She does not trust all these mushrooming boutiques to be found all over Calcutta now. One has even come up in a slummy area like Jadavpur. After all, a shop in the Park Street region has a different credibility!

How did Park Street come to have this "credibility"?

I shall quote below some descriptions of life on Park Street as observed by Moorhouse:

> The shopping style of Park Street is Westernized... There are occasional cubby-hole tradesmen, usually dispensing tobacco or pan or bootlaces, but most business is conducted behind plate-glass windows with a till instead of an old tin can to contain the currency. There are emporiums here which sell anything from plastic toys and lavatory paper to patent medicines, bottles of lime-juice, and biscuits which have been packaged by the factory in several layers of waxed or tin-foiled paper ... There are businesses which specialize in pop-up toasters or thermostatic irons... Park Street also includes two or three of the best bookshops in town, where you can purchase your Basildon Bond notepaper as well as Mr. Manchester's account of a President's death, but very little that is not written in English.[e]

On another page he writes:

> India sometimes seems to be the intruder here; it becomes the great amorphous power which the British used to feel claustrophobically surrounding them and threatening them.It is still there, waiting to be harnessed and bidden and used for the pleasure and necessity of alien values. There is no getting away from it. At almost every intersection along Park Street there are rickshaws waiting for passengers. There are small boys waiting to clean shoes. There are men of no apparent vocation gossiping around the tobacco stalls, smoking beedies which they have lit from a smouldering length of rope that someone has thoughtfully tied to a lamp-post...They are all in some way at the disposal of the other people moving in and out of the shops, the restaurants and the clubs, whose colour may be

> identical... but whose mannerisms suggest both ownership and alienation.[3]

These passages from Moorhouse bring out one point very clearly, that of a construction (both by the author and by those he is writing about) of "Park Street" as a sign of the "West" as represented by shops selling electrical equipments, lavatory paper, plastic toys, Basildon Bond notebooks. Park Street, more prominently than other areas in Calcutta, tells the history of its foreign rulers. To this day, Park Street and the area around it is sometimes referred to in popular Bengali parlance as shaheb para (the white-man neighborhood), signifying its history as the place of residence for the British administrators. Another characteristic that marks Park Street off from other important main streets in Calcutta is the absence of any public transportation on it. If one has to go somewhere on Park Street one either takes a taxi or gets off from a bus or a tram at the corner of the street and walk the rest of the way or rides ones own car. This fact too points to the history that Park Street used to be inhabited by people who normally owned some means of transportation. The reported "credibility" associated with Park Street merchandize can be traced back to the history of its association with the ruling white elites. The ruling class and its style of consumption signifying its position came to acquire the weight of status and finally justified by authenticity.

Obviously only the wealthy elite could afford to buy the "authenticity" from Park Street. The street thus became an enclave of shops selling highly priced "authentic" Western items of consumption (such as cakes and pastries at the Flurie's). The other place in Calcutta that had the same credibility for its stock of authentic Western commodities was the New Market located about a quarter of a mile north of Park Street.

Mrs. Bhattacharya's story of buying Tangail saris from a shop in the Park Street area thus reproduces Park Street and its merchandize as a sign for high status and authenticity. The history that is told through this story is that of colonialism and the development of Calcutta as the Imperial city.

Suprobha Ghosh tries to avoid buying handloom saris from the woman in her para who has recently started a home-business in saris. Mondira Sanyal, on the other hand, finds a reliable corner to buy saris from Lolita pishi (aunty Lolita) in her para where she believes she finds good saris at reasonable prices.

For the small-scale sari business that women carry out from their homes and which is becoming increasingly popular, ones relations within the para plays a crucial role. The nearest English equivalent for para is neighborhood, but the principles that structure relations

within a para and thereby define it are different from that of a neighborhood as it is understood in a Western society. The word can be traced back to the spatial organization of social relations in villages where different castes would have their own para and live within that space (e.g., bamun para means the para of the Brahmins, kayet para means the para of the Kayastha). Given the system of caste-endogamy, a majority of the people living within a para would be related to each other as kins of some kind and hence obligated to perform ritual duties toward each other. Social occasions were indistinguishable from ritual activities. Thus the structuring principle of interpersonal and social relations within a para came to be governed by ones participation in rituals.

As the city grew and people came to settle in the city from their natal villages, the perception of social relations in terms of a para persisted. Since in the city people in a para are not related as kins, a para came to be loosely defined as a territory within which the inhabitants financially contribute and share in the organization of the most important yearly socio-religious festival in Bengal, the Durga Puja (this is the social history of the innumerable Sharbojonin Durga Pujas in Calcutta). This is the central ritual in the context of the city that makes people identify with a para. The indigenous notion of a samaj (which in these days is used by Bengali speakers to

mean "society" as in English) incorporated the ritual rights and obligations by which one produced oneself socially. In the city, samajikota (social behavior/exchanges) in its indigenous sense thus often came to be understood by people (specially among those who still retain the memory of a closely knit samaj) as applicable to others who are part of a para.

Thus, Suprobha Ghosh feels obligated to observe samajikota with the woman in her para who has newly started a handloom sari business at her home even though she does not have much confidence in her honesty. As two people living in the same para, the indigenous logic of participation in each other's rituals is now used to structure ones perception of ones social obligations within ones para.

Mondira Sanyal tells another story about this para identity. As I have already explained, relations within a para in the village was largely defined by kinship relations. In the city, people within a para usually address each other by some sort of kinship term as befits ones relative age and social position. Thus Mondira, who is a younger woman, addresses Lolita as pishi (father's sister). Kinship relations in the indigenous historical context formed a mutual aid society. In the city, and specially in a situation of commodity exchange, the idiom of kinship opens up possibilities of complete deception (as

Suprobha is afraid of) or complete patronage (as Mondira believes she gets from her Lolita pishi) with a range in between that combines the two in different proportions.

The notion of para is thus an important element constituting the meanings of handloom saris in the market of Calcutta. Women carrying out a home-business recruit their customers from their para-network and the degree of their success depends upon how skillfully they can manipulate the idioms of kinship and the social relations associated with it.

Part of "high culture" in Calcutta is organized around a discursive knowledge of works of the celebrated Bengali poet and man of literature, Rabindranath Thakur. Rabindranath himself established two schools specially intended to promote the learning and disseminating of the liberal arts for which there were almost no institutions until then. The knowledge of "Culture" one acquired at these institutions were accepted as the standards of "high culture" in Bengal for about four or five decades and rapidly spread among urban Bengalis through propagation of songs written by Rabindranath through the mass media (radio and films) and popular singers. Even twenty years ago, knowing and appreciating these songs was an absolute essential for establishing ones "good taste" among urban Bengalis. Knowledge about these songs was appropriated by

"experts" soon after Rabindranath established his schools. These were people who claimed to have learnt these songs directly from the master himself (who never formally put the music down on paper himself) and were hence uniquely qualified to teach them in their authentic form. There are several music schools in Calcutta run by one or the other of these "expert" figures which concentrate solely upon teaching these songs and a few thousand young Bengali men and women come out with a professional degree in singing these particular songs in an authentic style.

Affiliation with these schools is generally marked by a style of dress and manner which is widely regarded among Bengalis as representing a higher than average level of aesthetic sensitivity. This style signifies an awareness of what came to be constructed as "traditional Indian arts and crafts" over the period of Bengal Renaissance and an ability of appreciate the beauty of it. In short, the sub-culture around these schools of music produces people who embody a certain sign of aesthetic awareness by dressing and behaving in a certain manner.

There are two well-known sari boutiques in Calcutta which are owned by figures who are prominent in the world of songs of Rabindranath. The customers of these shops are primarily recruited from among the network of students at their school and others who retain a respect for the reputation for taste associated with the figures owning the

shops. A Tangail sari from any of these shops stands as a marker of ones taste for the finer arts (as it does for Sadhona Majumdar).

The city of Calcutta grew southward. Starting from the moment of first encampment by Job Charnock, nineteenth century urban Bengali culture (also known as the Babu culture, as distinctive from the Renaissance culture that started to grow in the later part of the nineteenth century) was to be found primarily to the north of the area where the British had their offices and residences. The Babu culture was marked by ostentatious efforts by wealthy Bengalis to imitate certain styles of consumption of the rulers but not bothering to assimilate those with the cultural values that gave meaning to them. Toward the later part of the nineteenth century with the rise of the Renaissance culture with its emphasis on the ideational dimension of Western culture, the Babu culture came to be regarded as a sign of vulgar unenlightened conservatism as opposed to the refined sophistication of the Brahmo dominated Renaissance culture. Spatially bound as the Babu culture was to the northern part of the city, cultural styles in Calcutta came to be divided broadly into the "southern" and the "northern", the former marking developments in the culture since the Renaissance and the latter always lagging behind in its attempts to catch up

with "modernity" (as defined by the Renaissance).

The north/south opposition is used by consumers in reading handloom saris too. Buyers who live in the north but aspire to present themselves as knowledgeable about the current craze in the south come to the sari shops in the south (though it is only under extremely unusual circumstances or for some very specific reasons would a southerner go for shopping in the north). Sellers would stock different varieties of design and color depending upon the location of their shop and thus participate in reproducing the distinction. One seller of Tangail sari who has a shop both in Shyambazar (in the north) and in Ballygunje (in the south) informed me that he sends the cheaper saris in bright garish colors to his shop in Shyambazar and the lighter and more subtle shades are reserved for his shop in Ballygunje.

The area in between the north and the south is commonly referred to by a Calcuttan as the <u>office para</u> indicating thereby the largely non-residential character of this area. The <u>office para</u>, in a Calcuttan's perception, is the stretch between the Birla Planetarium and Binoy-Badal-Dinesh Bagh (generally referred to as the B.B.D.Bagh. It was formerly known as the Dalhousy Square, commemorating Lord Dalhousy, and was renamed a couple of decades following independence after three Bengali freedom fighters

who died, in the early part of the century, trying to assasinate some British official), including in it some parts of Chittaranjan Avenue (formerly Central Avenue). The only residential pocket in this area is the area around Park Street.

The office para, in the predominantly patriarchal Bengali culture, was generally considered a masculine space even twenty years ago. Women working in offices was still a rare sight. Only under very unusual circumstances would a woman take up a job in an office. Also, historically shops in this area catered mostly to the British or to the indigenous rich people and thus were (and still are to some extent) generally not patronised by the average middle class Bengali shopper. From Suprobha Ghosh's story we know that even forty years ago Bengali women usually did not go out to shop for their own saris. It is only in the last thirty years or so that women have started to go out of their houses to go for shopping. Even then, most women try to stay close to home (for various structural reasons such as having little time after doing all their housework, or being constrained by the vagaries of public transport in the city). Since the residential areas of the city fall to the north and the south of the office para, the women usually patronise the local sari shops.

The sari shops in the office para are thus of the more exclusive and expensive variety whose customers, about

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twenty years ago, were wives of wealthy men who had their own transportation and thus could visit the office para. The office para boasts of such special sari shops such as the Handloom House on Lindsay Street which is the government owned handloom sari shop that stocks expensive handloom saris from all over India, or the Cottage Industry Emporium on the corner of Suren Banerjee Street that also stocks all kinds of Indian handicrafts (along with handloom saris) as an effort on the part of the government to make these crafts commercially viable.

The office para today is not as predominantly masculine as it was twenty years ago. Even though the idea of a "working woman" is still struggling to gain acceptance among the middle class Bengali, many more women are found to be working in the business offices today than ever before. Also women in general have become more mobile (specially the younger generation below thirty). But the association of shops in this area with a kind of specialness still lingers in the collective memory of the urban Bengali woman. If she is a non-working housewife, a visit to a sari shop in the office para is always considered a special event. Even a working woman to whom the office para is no foreign land buys sari from the Handloom House on Lindsay Street to make a sign of the specialness of her taste (as does Shukla Ganguly).

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The most important pocket of sari shops in south Calcutta is on and around Rashbehari Avenue and in the Gariahat market (which is located at the crossing of Gariahat Road and Rashbehari Avenue). Most Bengali housewives who live in south Calcutta do their sari shopping there. Beside established big shops lining Rashbehari Avenue and on the Gariahat market, there are innumerable sidewalk shops on this stretch of south Calcutta. Rashbehari Avenue and Gariahat market fall in the area of south Calcutta known as Ballygunje, an area which is commonly accepted as setting the trend among the middle class Bengali. Geographically, however, south Calcutta stretches beyond Ballygunje. There are areas such as Tollygunje, Jadavpur, Jodhpur Park, New Alipur, Behala which lie to the further south after Ballygunje. These areas developed after independence as millions of Hindu Bengalis migrated to West Bengal from what was then Pakistan. Calcutta started to grow southward as many of these uprooted people tried to build up a new life in Calcutta. Most of the population of Tollygunje, Jadavpur, New Alipur and Behala is composed of such immigrants. In terms of social status, thus, these areas always lagged behind the dominant culture of Ballygunje. Hence, though pockets of sari markets have sprung up, and are still coming up, in these areas, most women, when they want to

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buy some "good" saris, ideally want to go to the shops in Ballygunje (as does Archana Das).

In the above account I have tried to put together some of the history of the cultural topography of the city. This history shows up in fragments in the stories about Tangail saris that people tell as a means of representing themselves within a system of signs. History of the city is thus used and reinvented in many different ways through the everyday activities of the people.

ENDNOTES:

1. Moorhouse, G
   1984 Calcutta: The City Revealed. Penguin Books, London.

2. Ibid, p 158

3. Ibid, pp 159-160.

CHAPTER VII

A VISIT TO THE ARTISTS' STUDIOS

The village of Fulia is one train station away from the town of Shantipur, one of the major centers of handloom weaving in West Bengal. Even thirty to forty years ago, handwoven saris from Shantipur (commonly called Shantipuri saris) were considered to be of good quality saris among the range of handwoven saris. The other type of handwoven saris that had a reputation for the quality of weave was the Dhanekhali (i.e., saris from Dhanekhali). But the scenario in the market of handwoven saris has radically changed in the last ten to fifteen years. Fulia, which was primarily an agricultural village has in this time grown into a reputed center of handwoven sari and overshadowed the earlier strongholds of handweaving. The growth of Fulia as a weaving village is primarily due to large scale migration of Hindu weavers from the district of Tangail in Bangladesh to India following two major political upheavals in the subcontinent, the first was the independence of India and the partitioning of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the other was the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent Islamic nation in 1970. Almost all of these people settled in and around Shantipur and Nabadwip. As is customary among weavers in the Indian subcontinent, the

immigrants still identify themselves with their occupation and their homeland. That is, they call themselves Tangailer taanti (weavers of Tangail). Majority of these people are weavers-by -caste and hold their caste name, Basak. Though there are a few weavers by the name of Das who also claim to be weavers-by-caste from Tangail the Basaks do not support this claim. A Basak is proud of his higher caste position in relation to the Das. At least, under ideal circumstances they would have liked to maintain the hierarchy in practice by not marrying into the Das'. But market, like death, is a great leveller. There are a few cases of Basak-Das marriage in the village now which some older people claim would have been unthinkable in the golden days "back home" (deshe). Apart from the Basaks and the Das, there are many "workers" (karmochari), as they are commonly called, who are farmers-by-caste from the district of Koochbehar in West Bengal. These are people who earn a livelihood by weaving on someone else's loom as a laborer. If one inquires farther one finds that most of these immigrants from Koochbehar are originally from Tangail and have come over to Fulia in connection with someone they knew in their village back in Tangail who was now settled in Fulia. As they are not weavers-by-caste they do not know how to work a loom to begin with. Hence it is necessary for them to begin the trade as an apprentice for someone, and most of the time they try to locate some relative-by-

village (gram shamporke attiya) or some actual relative who agrees to let them stay to learn the trade in exchange for working on their (the relative's) loom at a lower rate after learning it. Of course this is not a permanent arrangement. Often these people go off to work for someone else after the period of apprenticeship is over if they are not tied to their benefactors in some real sense (e.g., if they are indebted to their sponsors for the hut they built to live in). Whichever way it is, most of these people do not own a loom but work for others as free laborers.

Social hierarchy among the weavers is decided on the basis of owning or not owning a loom. Almost everyone who owns a loom is a weaver-by-caste, i.e., either a Basak or a Das. A Basak considers it either a misfortune or an indication of lack of knowledge in the caste-skill if he does not own a loom. The farmers from Koochbehar are thus looked down upon as non-weavers. A Basak would often be found to comment on the inauthenticity of the people who weave without being a weaver-by-caste by saying: "one is not a weaver just because one is working a loom!"(tant chalailei tanti hoy naa!) Thus all Basaks aspire to own a loom some day.[1]

Weavers from Tangail have settled primarily in three villages around Shantipur and Nabadwip. The names are Fulia (which is one station away from Shantipur and in the district of Nadia), Samudragarh and Dhaatrigram (close to

Nabadwip and in the district of Bardhaman). Among these three Fulia is the best known for the quality and variety of handloom saris. It is also the location of my description.

Let us take a quick tour around the village before we speak to some people and hear what they have to say. We do not have a palanquin. So we will either have to walk, or ride a bike or hire a cycle-rickshaw. The village is quite spread out. So it will be easier for us if we get into a cycle-rickshaw. They all wait for passengers by the side of the train station. Business is quite good for them. Specially since the market for Tangail saris have opened up people are constantly coming and going by train or bus (the bus stop is adjacent to the train station). Most of the travelling people consist of weavers who take their supply to the city carrying big bundles on their shoulders or women (and men) who come from the city to buy handloom saris directly from its "source". There is also a small percentage of people who daily commute to other towns close by (such as Ranaghat or Krishnagar) on jobs. The rickshawdrivers are very adept at spotting newcomers in the village and always charge a higher fare from them. That is their chance of making a few extra bucks from the business. So one has to be a little cautious in hiring a rickshaw and bargain a little before agreeing to a price.

There is a bazaar next to the station. Along with a

fresh meat and vegetable market there are innumerable small shops selling various items starting from cheap cosmetics to yarns for weaving to spare parts for a wooden loom to handloom saris and many other objects of common use. Five six years ago a photography store opened in the bazaar. Many wealthy weavers these days want to have their special saris photographed and preserved for posterity or have a family photograph in the style of the city people. It has also become very popular to take portrait photographs of young women to be used when looking for a match for them.

The rickshaw starts off from where the bazaar ends. It passes by one of the new weavers'cooperatives that has opened. In fact, cooperatives are almost mushrooming these days. All cooperatives in the village (as in all over the state) are associated with the government apex body of all the weavers'cooperatives in the state, Tantuja. As the apex body, Tantuja buys 80% of the product of each cooperative with the responsibility for arranging for their sale. Thus, to be able to form a cooperative is to be guaranteed sale of 80% of ones stock. There are quite a few cooperatives now which are operating under false names, i.e., only one person sells his saris to Tantuja since he has registered his concern as a cooperative by putting in some false names of weavers in the requisite number. However, not all cooperatives are like that. There are three big cooperatives which together form about 10% of the

weaving population. Two of these came into existence in the early to mid seventies after a crisis in the handloom weaving business for shortage of yarn. At that time some nationalized banks came forward to help these weavers by providing them with loans to form cooperatives on their own. A few years after that these cooperatives came to be associated with the government apex body, Tantuja.

Leaving the cooperative behind us we now enter into the area of the village that is called "Fulia colony", which is the area where most of the people engaged in service, i.e., the office-goers, live. The service people live mostly in the exterior of the area, the part that is closer to the station. As one proceeds to the interior the clamor of looms working increase progressively. It is a steady "khata khat, khata khat" sound that starts at the crack of dawn and goes on until sundown. During peak seasons the looms keep working even after sundown. One can see kerosene lamps, or in some cases electric bulbs, burning inside the enclosed space where looms are kept and hear the steady noise of the loom. After a while one gets used to it so that it blends into the surroundings, like the honking of the cycle-rickshaws coming and going all through the day.

The rickshaw takes a turn from Fulia colony towards Buincha, another para (neighborhood) within Fulia. The offices of the two oldest cooperatives are in Buincha. We

can get off from the rickshaw for a while and enter there. Nothing to worry about. The rickshaw will be waiting there under the shade of the tree for us to resume our journey.

Today is Monday, the day of the week when the member weavers of the cooperatives bring in their supply of the week and get paid in cash. The room where the saris are being taken in is very crowded. Saris are stacked on the floor in a pile. Each weaver is coming in with his bundle (normally containing three to four saris) and having his saris inspected for any defects in weave by a man sitting on the floor. First the man measures the width of the sari with a measuring tape, then checks the consistency of the weave by passing his hand over some parts of the sari. If it is a woven border he checks the weave of the design in the border to see if the yarn has fallen smoothly over the pattern. If it is an embroidered jamdani he checks the embroideries for the density of their pattern. Usually a sari is passed unless there is some glaring defect in it. A man sitting on a table is keeping account of who owes how much from the cooperative.

The cooperatives get some of the designs for their saris from Tantuja. The government of India has established several offices to aid in the promotion of indigenous arts and crafts. One of these is the Weaver's Service Center that has a branch in every state. Among other things, this Center hires certified artists to make innovative and

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saleable designs for handloom saris. The Center also does research on traditional and authentic sari border designs either to preserve or to improvise upon them to make them more attractive for the present day consumer. This office periodically supplies Tantuja with designs for saris which Tantuja then gives over to the cooperatives. It is close to the Puja times and Tantuja has ordered several special designs from this cooperative. Some of those saris have come in today. One is a Benarasi design on a silk Tangail. It is indeed special because a Benarasi design requires a special way of fitting the jacard machine to the loom in order to weave the design horizontally on the aanchal which is a specialty of Benarasi saris. It is difficult to weave. One of the best weavers of the cooperative got the commission to weave this one. He is weaving about thirty pieces of this sari. There are other Puja special designs. One that catches attention among them is a sky blue border on a navy blue sari in the style of arches in Mughal architecture. As usual, there is an abundance of colors. This year there are many saris with a narrow border in muga. Women in Calcutta seem to be liking that a lot.

Apart from getting designs from Tantuja the cooperatives have their own designers. These designers are weavers who also have an artistic streak that they make use of in making designs. One of them, by the name of Jagannath Basak, is sitting in the front office-room right now. He

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showed us some of his designs. He said he sometimes gets his ideas from books of designs on gold ornaments. Before designing became a business of experts, indigenous motifs were linked to certain cultural ideas and their repertory was limited. These motifs were not confined to any particular craft but were used in any kind of decoration of objects. Thus the same design could be found on a gold necklace and on the border of a sari. The link is still maintained by the weavers of today.

The cooperative has a room for retail sale too. There are some women from Ranaghat (one of the small towns close by) who have come in a group to look at and buy saris. There is also another woman from Calcutta who runs a home business in saris.

On the walls of the corridor of the office is the picture of a man who, as someone explained to us, was the sympathetic bank official who helped them with a loan from the bank to set up this cooperative. The man himself was originally from Tangail. When he came to know of the plight of his desher lok (people from back home) he took the initiative to rescue them from their misfortune. Thus he is venerated by the members of the cooperative as a founding father.

We have now completed our tour of the cooperative and may now get back on our rickshaw. The rickshawdriver complains that we have kept him waiting for too long. He

could have taken another passenger within this time. He demands to be compensated for this loss. We will have to pay him two rupees over and above the agreed upon fare. We agree. We have no choice. It is time for the 2:30 train from Calcutta and all other rickshaws are waiting at the station for passengers. The sun is high up and it is too hot to walk around. Anyway, the cloud disperses from the rickshawdriver's face. He starts pedalling vigorously. We are going towards Taltala. On the way he tries to make conversation. He asks us if we want to stop at the Kalimondir (temple of the goddess Kali) to make some offerings. Do we know that this village is the place of birth of the poet Krittibash, the one that had written the Ramayana?ᵉIf we plan to stay around for another day he would be very happy to take us to the actual place where the great poet was born. It is only about thirty minutes by rickshaw from the village. There is a library there too. He will not charge us much. He will take us there for ten rupees. Why are we visiting the village anyway? Are we in the sari business? If we really are interested in buying quality saris at a reasonable price we should ask him. Cooperative saris are not of good quality. Nobody supervises what the weaver does. He knows just the right person for us. He is a big businessman in saris, but he is also very humble. The cooperative-people are government's servants. What do they care. They do not even care to take

the time to show you all the different kind of saris. This businessman will take the time and show us lots of good saris. What do we say? Should he turn the rickshaw and take us there? What is there at Taltala? Only some small weavers. We cannot buy saris from them.

By this time we have reached Taltala. There are many small huts there with a few brickhouses scattered here and there. The brickhouses belong to wealthy weavers who have other weavers working under them. Such weavers are called mahajans. Mahajan is a relative term. A man who has three weavers working under him is a mahajan in relation to his weavers, but he may have his own mahajan to whom he supplies. The biggest mahajans are those who directly sell to the market. Production is organized in the village on this mahajani system. A weaver who owns only one loom has almost no direct access to the market. He always works under some mahajan who provides him with yarn in advance and then pays him on each piece of sari subtracting the cost of the yarn. The rate on each piece depends on a range of variables, the price the sari is expected to fetch in the market, whether it is silk or cotton (the former takes longer to weave), whether it is a jamdani (embroidered designs) or a woven border, how wide its woven border is etc. In most cases the mahajan supplies the weaver with designs to weave. This way the mahajan has a greater degree of control over the weaver. Also, competition for

exclusivity of design is intensified under this system. When the mahajan provides the weaver with yarn in advance it is called the dadan system. In some cases the weaver buys his own yarn but weaves according to the design provided by the mahajan. In this system, there is always a danger of ones designs leaking out. The mahajans never have complete control over their weavers. They seek to enhance their control sometimes by blocking the weaver's money that is due from them, and sometimes by simply raising their rate per piece of sari. In fact, the more exclusive the designs of a mahajan the higher is the rate he pays his weavers. At Taltala we notice many inverted wooden buckets with colored yarn wrapped around them being dried under the sun. Questioning revealed that these yarns have been starched and are now being dried before being wound around the bobbin. Starching of the yarn is ideally done very early in the morning when there is still some moisture in the air. It makes the starch stick to the yarn better. After the starched yarn is completely dry it is put on a spinning wheel kind of machine to be wound around the bobbin. It was afternoon and some women had already started to wound the dried yarn into the bobbins. This entire sequence of pre-weaving work is the responsibility of the women of the household. The act of weaving is men's work. In the entire village there is not a single Basak woman who sits in front of the loom. But the speed and efficiency of

a weaver depends largely upon the hard work and skill of the women who prepare the yarn. The woman has to keep up with the speed of weaving by keeping the bobbins ready to be used while weaving is going on. Also the smoothness of the texture of a sari and the strength of the yarn depends upon the quality of starching. If the yarn is not tough enough it keeps getting torn when stretched on the loom. It slows down weaving and also makes for an uneven texture in the weave. Most women in a weaving household work very hard from day break until late at night, starting with starching the yarn in the morning and wounding them around the wooden bucket to dry, then cooking the afternoon meal (often for about ten people at a time), then sitting down to prepare the bobbins before getting back into the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

Let us now enter into one of the sheds where the looms are kept. Men are working on them, so we can watch the looms at work. There are mainly two different kinds of looms. The simpler one is called a Dobby loom, where the weaver weaves the designs on the border of a sari with the help of several pedals underneath the loom. Though it is possible to weave designs on this loom, its range is limited only to a limited number of simple designs. The other kind of loom is called the Jacard loom. The name signifies the attachment of a machine (named after Monsieur Jacard) to the loom which makes it possible to weave much

more complicated and bigger designs on the border and sometimes on the body of a sari. The machine is attached to the loom from above with some nylon cords and moves as the weaver works the pedals underneath. A series of punch cards is attached to the loom that passes through the machine. Holes have been punched in these cards on the basis of some mathematical calculations from the measurement of the design on a graph paper. Oh yes, the designs have to be copied on a graph paper first in order to calculate the holes that has to go into the punch card and in what order. The more complicated the designs, the larger is the number of punch cards that have to go into the machine.

In the other corner of the shed a man is weaving a jamdani. While the body of the sari is still woven on the loom, a jamdani is embroidered with hands instead of having the design woven on it. The weaver weaves about a yard or so of the sari and then starts to embroider that part and then goes on to weaving the next yard or so. The technique of embroidery is to pass the yarn of the color of the embroidery through the warp by counting the number of lines in it that correspond to the breadth of that part of the embroidery. Sometimes if the design is very complicated or unfamiliar the weaver keeps a piece of paper with the design drawn on it under the sari so that the outline of the design is visible while he embroiders. Usually with familiar designs the weaver does it without any such help.

Some times two people sit on either side of the loom to do the embroidery so that it is done faster. This style of embroidery puts great strain on the eyes. Weavers who are skilled in doing jamdani embroidery are often found to be suffering from short-sightedness at a relatively early age.

We will have to cut short our visit here for the time being or our rickshawdriver will again raise his fare. He had already started to show signs of restlessness by the time we got back to him.

This time we are moving back towards the station. The village extends even beyond Taltala, but our rickshawdriver assured us that we will not find anything new there. This time he insisted that just for once we visit this mahajan he had been telling us about. Then we shall be able to see for ourselves the difference in the treatment of people at the cooperative and at this man's place. Also, this mahajan sells to many "big" people in Calcutta. The other day the famous film actress so-and-so had come all the way to Fulia just to buy sari from this mahajan.

This man lives in Chatkatala. The village Fulia is actually divided in half by a highway that runs across it towards Shantipur. Chatkatala is on the other side of the highway. So we are now going back towards the station and the highway to get to Chatkatala.

Our rickshaw is now going through the narrow pathways

of Chatkatala. Again the huts and weaving sheds fall on both sides. The incessant noise of the loom blends with it. Children look at us curiously. The women, sitting in front of their huts, busy winding the dried yarn on the bobbins, look up from their work. Someone is folding a newly woven sari by the roadside.

The rickshaw turned into a sharp corner. A big brick house stood about hundred yards from us. That is the house of our man. When we got off from the rickshaw the driver was called aside by someone from the house and some money passed into the driver's hands. Probably commission for bringing in a customer. We entered through the front door. Today is the day everywhere for bringing in the weekly supply of saris. The one big room in the front of the house is crowded with weavers with their bundles of saris. The mahajan is sitting on a platform with a mattress on it. It is called a gadi. It is a sign of prosperity in business. As in the cooperative, the weavers are bringing in their supplies one by one and the mahajan is inspecting each sari before taking it in. At this moment he is looking closely at a buti sari. The butis are not very evenly spaced. He accuses the weaver of cheating on him by putting in fewer butis than he was supposed to. The weaver must be stealing on the yarn advanced to him. The weaver denies vehemently. He asks the mahajan to open up the folds of the sari and count the butis. The mahajan does not take up the

challenge. He says he is experienced enough to be able to guess the number of butis by looking at their spacing. He penalizes the weaver by paying him five rupees less on the rate for the sari. He also reminds the weaver that he had brought in fewer saris than his quota last week, so he should fulfill that quota the coming week. He has to keep up his supplies to his dealers. How can he do that with such irresponsible weavers? Does he not pay them enough? Who loaned him (the weaver) money last year for his daughter's wedding? Does he remember that he still owes the mahajan for the two looms he bought six months ago?

A second weaver approached the gadi with his bundle. It seems he is one of those special weavers who are given the exclusive designs to weave. The mahajan sent him over to the adjacent room and asked him to wait there. His bundle was not opened in public.

A third one opened his bundle of woven border silk saris. The mahajan inspected the weave. He found it to be a little uneven at points. But the border was woven well. This weaver got his money for the week in full.

When the fourth one approached the mahajan looked up at him and said: Have I not told you I cannot take in any more weavers? I already have more than enough. I am still trying to sell off last years stocks from Puja. Why do you keep pestering me? The man rubbed his hands together in a gesture of obedience and requested the mahajan to take a

look at his woven saris. He is a very good weaver. His other mahajan is not treating him well. He knows this mahajan is kindhearted. Will he not consider his case once more? The mahajan asked him to come back after the Puja. This Puja he will have some idea if he will need to take in more weavers. If he does, he will consider his case.

The next one opened his bundle to show five or six silk Tangails with jamdani motifs on them. The mahajan looked satisfied. He started to make a rough sketch of another design on a piece of paper to give to the weaver as his next assignment. The sketch was very rough. An outsider would not be able to see a design in what was done on the paper. The weaver, however, seemed quite sure about his task. He asked about the combination of color to be used. The mahajan answered: same as last time, only use olive green instead of bottle green. The weaver went into the next room where the mahajan stores yarn to sell to weavers. It also where his cashier sits to make payments to the weavers.

It is getting almost dark outside. Our rickshawdriver came to the door to ask us when we plan to leave. It is time for him to go home. Our rickshaw left Taltala towards the station, from where we will have to catch the 6:30 train to Calcutta (there is no place to stay overnight in Fulia). If the train is on time it should get us back to Calcutta by 9:00.

I shall go on to describe now some of the conversations I had with some weavers after I started living in the village. The presentation is done in third person, i.e., I have described in my voice what I observed and learnt from them. However, I have often used the style of exposition used by the weavers (though in a translated form) in narrating their lives and their views so as to provide the reader with some flavor of the native style. My reason for choosing this form of exposition was that it would have been very difficult to give the reader a coherent idea about the life-history of each weaver if I tried to stick to the "Actual Communication" that took place between me and each weaver over periods of days and hours which often broke off and taken up after several days. However, to the best of my knowledge, I have reproduced the stories as the weavers told them to me.

It is early in the day, around 8 o'clock. I am talking to Narayan Basak, who is a man of about 60 with an expression of disillusionment in his eyes. His health is not too well. He coughs intermittently between conversation. He is also a heavy smoker. Cigarette is too expensive. He smokes <u>bidi</u>, the locally made variety. He has two looms in his shed, but only one of them has a half-

finished sari on it. The other looks dusty. Quite obviously it has not been used for sometime. Narayan explained that his son was supposed to work on that one, but unfortunately he has no interest in the jat-byabsha (caste-business). He has opened a small stationary shop near the station. He is a selfish one too, does not look after his aging parents. He has moved out with his family a few years back and now lives at the other end of the village.

When Narayan first came to Fulia, it was a long-long time ago, you would see none of this market, shops, weavers' sheds, all this hustle and bustle of activity. There were only a few houses scattered here and there. How long ago was it? Oh, l-o-o-n-g ago! Narayan is not quite sure of the year, but it was about ten years after Hindustan and Pakistan became separated. Narayan was a young man then. His mama (maternal uncle) who has visited India had told them many stories about the good life in India. In Tangail Narayan was at that time going through a particularly bad phase in his life. He had gotten into trouble with his mahajan for not doing his work on time, the little land that he owned had been taken over by someone else on account of not returning a loan. Sure, he had always been somewhat lazy about his work, but there are other people like him. Not everyone is as unfortunate as he is! Anyway, he decided to emigrate to India to try his luck here. When he came over there was no settlement of Fulia.

He at first settled in Shatipur and worked under a mahajan there. There was no such thing called a Tangail sari in the market then. He supplied his mahajan with whatever sari he wove and his mahajan sold those saris with other Shantipuri saris. Even other Tangail weavers who came over to India after partition or after the Bangladesh war often had to market their saris by the name of Shantipuri. Nobody knew about Tangail saris. You have to sell your sari to those wholesellers in Barabazaar, right! If you told them you want to sell Tangail saris they would turn you out right away. Those days were really bad! Tangail saris are of a much better quality than any other saris being woven in this country. These Shantipuris and Dhanekhalis would never come up to the standard of Tangail. They do not know the technique of the finish! They cannot bring that glaze to the sari! And such good saris would have to sell at the price of these cheap Shantipuris. Tangail weavers are better weavers, that has to be admitted. Of course now times are different. Tangail saris are fancy saris now. But if you ask him, the new saris do not have the quality of the old. All these people from Koochbehar do not know a thing about real weaving. All they have learnt is how to pull the maku (the needle like contraption that moves across the breadth of the loom carrying the yarn across the warp from one side to the other), that does not make you a tanti! And even real Tangail weavers are these days more

interested in making quick money than in making a good sari. They would weave five saris a week by pulling their maku as fast as they can. But that does not make for a good sari. Narayan himself is too old to weave regularly these days. It demands physical fitness to pull the maku all through the day. What he does instead is he collects extra saris from other weavers. Do you know what an "extra sari" means? A weaver always saves some yarn from the advance given to him by his mahajan and weaves an extra sari or two that he sells on his own to make some extra money. If one knows which weaver is working with which mahajan one can always collect a good variety of saris at quite a good price. For his age, Narayan is not doing very badly in this business. Many of the service people from the Fulia colony comes to him to buy a good sari at a cheaper price. They know the same sari would cost at least ten rupees more from the mahajan. Narayan is also good at being a salesman. He knows when to drop a name. Thus, even as we were sitting there, a girl of about seventeen or eighteen came to buy a Dhakai sari. Narayan brought out several from a trunk. The girl seemed to particularly like an off-white with orange embroidery on it. Narayan was quick to spot her interest. Almost offhandedly he said: "this one is from Binoy Basak". A story has been told. Binoy Basak is one of the biggest mahajans in the area who is known for the specialty of his design and also because he sells to the most prestigious

shops in Calcutta. The girl was given a strong legitimation for her choice. She bought the sari for rupees 180. Aside from customers from Fulia colony, Narayan also has some regular customers from Calcutta. One is a small sari businessman in north Calcutta who visits him bi-weekly to get his supply. Another is a housewife with her home business. Then there are always people who come and go and stop by to see saris. These are mostly relatives of the service people in the colony who live in the cities. The colony people bring their relatives over to him to earn a reputation of being knowledgeable about saris. It is a very good way of being popular among relatives.

Manohar Basak is a man in his late fifties. He used to be a prosperous mahajan. But through a series of misfortunes, most of which were caused by his bad judgment of people, he has been reduced to a petty mahajan with only about twenty looms working under him. He also used to be very active in the social-political arena in the village. Even though he was a mahajan he had actively helped in the formation of cooperatives when all other mahajans were trying to sabotage the movement. To this day, he commands great respect from the entire Basak community in Fulia.

Manohar Basak came to Fulia in the early seventies. Those were hard days for Tangail weavers. There was an acute shortage of yarn and hardly any work for the weavers.

The mahajans of the time shifted the entire burden of it on the weavers. The rate per sari came down to as low as rupees ten for the weavers. Even then not every one could find work. Many weavers seriously started thinking about giving up their jat-byabsha and take up some other occupation. As Manohar Basak put it dramatically:"can you imagine! A tanti left his loom and went on to dig soil (maati kaatar kaaj) like a common laborer!" It was the ultimate indignity for a tanti. Their identity is integrally linked to their jat-byabsha. Manohar felt a compelling urge to intervene in this state of affairs. Along with some other politically minded Basaks of Tangail he fought to bring the cooperatives into existence to allow the tanti a chance to live his life as he ought to. Todays young Basak boys do not understand the value of this sentiment. They do not even know their jat-byabsha very well. Where do you find the quality of yesterday in today's saris? They only see it as a means to making money. If they can make better money somewhere else they will go on to do that. Today the market is everything. You will have to weave whatever the market wants. I sell my saris to a Barabazaar wholeseller. I take it to him once every two weeks. These wholesalers of today are so unscrupulous. They never pay you the entire amount for your supply. The entire business has to be run on credit. You have to wait until the Puja to get paid. In the meantime you have to find your

own means to pay your weavers. After all, you cannot starve them. They need their weekly payment. Tell me, where would I always find cash to pay them? It is getting tougher everyday.

Sunil Basak is a small weaver who works under a mahajan. He came to Fulia a couple of years after the Bangladesh war in 1971. When he crossed the border he had nothing with him, not even his loom. With his wife and two children he arrived in Fulia where his jatha (father's elder brother) was already settled. His name is Naresh Basak. He is also a small weaver like Sunil, working under a mahajan on the basis of weekly payment with two looms in his ownership. Naresh had started out like Sunil, with no possession. Then his mahajan, who also happened to be a distant relative of theirs, gave him a loom to work on which he could buy on hire-purchase from the mahajan. That is, each week the mahajan would hold back some amount from his weekly payment of saris until the loom was paid for. Like most older day small weavers, Naresh never kept any account of his loan from the mahajan, as a result of which he kept paying for his loan for about five years. However, now he does own a loom. His son owns one too. They both work for the same mahajan. Naresh never even contemplated switching his allegiance to another mahajan. Back in Tangail, switching mahajan was almost inconceivable. The

mahajans all knew each other and worked as a group. Often through generations a weaving family would be attached to the same mahajan's family. Within the confines of the village community switching mahajan amounted almost to high treason, unless a weaver was lucky enough to find a breach between two mahajans where he could fit himself. The relation between the mahajan and the weaver was structured along familial lines. While there was no dearth of negative feelings, often violent ones, on the part of the weavers towards the mahajans, the feelings were perceived within the context of a protector and his ward. The negative feelings were largely generated by a sense of betrayal. This state of affairs is clearly brought out by a story told to us by Naresh about another weaver back in Tangail. This weaver, his name was Ratan, worked for a mahajan whose mother was believed to have access to supernatural power. In other words, from time to time she was believed to be possessed by the goddess Kali and whatever this old woman said in that possessed state turned out to be true. Now Ratan had been rather unfortunate when it came to children. He had three daughters and no son. Ones future, both spiritual and material, was bleak without a son. This time, when Ratan's wife became pregnant again, his mahajan advised him to seek help from the goddess in the guise of his mother so he (Ratan) can intervene in the matter and have a son. Of course, the goddesse's help had to be paid

for. Ratan pawned his wife's gold bangles in the hope of begetting a son this time. He did get some detailed instructions from the goddess. His wife had to take the juice of a certain plant in an empty stomach on a moonless night. She gave birth to a baby. It was a girl. Ratan was devastated. He ran over to the mahajan's house and tried to bash his head with a daa (a kind of big heavy curved knife usually used for chopping heavy material or slaughtering animals) shouting "you have led me astray! Why did you do this to me?" Within the terms of his relations with his mahajan, his complaints were not directed towards some heartless deity, nor was it phrased in terms of any dishonest manipulation in the name of a goddess. It was the anguish of a child whose father/protector has failed him.

Naresh is a man from that world. He is worldly-wise enough to understand the profiteering of the mahajan at the expense of his work, but he cannot think the unthinkable, changing his mahajan. Sure he knows there is the cooperative. But who would he go to in the cooperative? In Naresh's words:"I have been to the cooperative. It is like a mela (fair). There are so many people." Clearly, not having a recognizable figure to whom to petition hampers his functioning. The mahajan is a figure like that.

Naresh's son, Nitai, who belongs more to the present times, sometimes argues with his father about wanting to switch to the mahajan Binoy Basak. Nitai is quite confident

of the quality of his own weaving. He has been to Binoy Basak's gadi once or twice and has a feeling that he may be taken in. The pay is higher than his present mahajan's. But the problem is with his father. Naresh does not want to displease his mahajan. Not for any moral reasons, but because in his life the mahajan is all powerful. He does not want to be exposed to his wrath. Also, having his son work under the same mahajan gives him some control over his son through the mahajan. Nitai could disregard his father's wishes, but he cannot because this mahajan has given them a "drum" that is used for setting the loom with the yarn for the warp (as a gesture of favor to a long-standing worker). This way they can get this part of the work done without any expenses. His father threatens he will not let him use the drum if he leaves to work with Binoy Basak. That means that he will have to rent a drum whenever he needs to set his loom. That will increase his cost per sari. With his wife pregnant with their second child he cannot really afford that extra expenditure.

Back in Tangail, the entire family of Sunil Basak used to work on buti saris. These are saris where the weaver embroiders small dots on the body of the sari along with weaving it on a loom. Sunil Basak started to work under the same mahajan his jatha, Naresh was working with when he first came here. That was his only connection. Naresh's mahajan took Sunil in on request from Naresh while making

it abundantly clear that he was stretching himself to his limit in taking on an extra weaver. The market is very bad. What does the tanti know what terrible trouble the mahajan has to go through to sell the saris? They sit comfortably at home to weave their saris, right! They do not have to walk the streets of the big city to know what reality is like! He is being very kind in taking Sunil in, but he cannot really guarantee how much he will be able to pay for his saris. He does not control the market, does he?

Thus Sunil's life started off in Fulia, with a single loom on loan from his mahajan. Those early years of the 70s were really hard on everyone. The rate per sari would rarely go above twelve rupees and even that would not be coming regularly. Sunil must say those days he often contemplated giving up his jat-byabsha and start with some kind of menial work somewhere. Many of his relatives and friends actually did. In Sunil's words:"I could have done some work of digging the soil (maati kaatar kaaj). But I have never lived away from the loom. I thought -- I will have to go to the city if I give up the loom. Who knows whether there would be any soil-digging work after a few days. At least if I stick to the mahajan I have some security. The mahajan has been good to me. In the sense that he had never told me not to bring any more saris because he cannot take anymore. May be because my weaving was good. May be because my saris sold. Who knows? I stuck

on to it." Thus Sunil weathered the bad days.

Sunil's story brings out another essential aspect of a weaver's world-view. The city is not their world. Most small weaver's relation with the city and its stories is through their mahajan and other people. It is changing, but still when it comes to actually linking their life's activities with the city, most older weavers back out. As Sunil's jatha Naresh Basak put it:"how can we survive without the mahajan? We are ignorant of the ways of the city. If we try to sell our stuff to the city people they will rip us off. They are so much cleverer than we are. I had visited Calcutta once with a relative. My purse was picked from my pocket the moment I stepped onto the Sealdah station. The city people are crooks. They are not simple. Without the mahajan there to act for us we would all be cheated of everything." These days Sunil regularly weaves jamdanis for his mahajan. His mahajan, Jogen Basak, has some steady customers in Barabazaar who supply to some shops in Calcutta. Jogen Basak is one of the oldest mahajans in this area. He has been here almost since the day Fulia was declared a township. Jogen Basak has a designer who makes his designs. But his market is not so much the exclusive market. Sunil often weaves designs which he has already woven several times. Though Sunil sometimes worries about the future of his eye-sight for weaving so much jamdanis, he tries to take comfort in the fact that he

earns more than people weaving bordered saris on a jacard loom. Sometimes he gets assignments for jamdanis that take three to four months to weave and embroider. His remuneration for those saris is almost double that of the jacard-loom weavers. Sunil takes care to do his work well. His embroideries are appreciated for their evenness and density. Unlike jacard-loom weavers, a jamdani weaver does not have the option of stealing on the yarn and selling an extra sari outside. Thus jamdani weavers are more dependent on their mahajans than the others. But their advantage is that they are also more sought after among the mahajans. A good jamdani sari can sell for thousands. Hence a good jamdani weaver always fetches a good rate from his mahajan whoever it is. As a matter of fact, Sunil has been approached by other mahajans to work for them at a higher rate. The only reason Sunil has not responded is that Jogen Basak treats him very well and he has the hope that he will be able to obtain some kind of permanent position in Jogen Basak's sari business some day and move up in the social ladder.

Khagen Sarkar is a man from Koochbehar who is now working as a "worker" for a small mahajan by the name of Suresh Basak. Like many others from Koochbehar, Khagen is originally from Tangail where they were farmers-by-caste. Even in Koochbehar they were engaged in farming, but since

Fulia started to flourish many of them discovered long-lost relatives (either relatives by blood or marriage or by village) in Fulia whom they could contact for possibilities of entering into the weaving trade. Unlike the weavers-by-caste, the farmers do not really have any sense of identification with their caste-occupation. Or so it appears from conversations with people like Khagen Sarkar. Khagen is quite clear about why he has come over to Fulia. To earn more money than he could possibly at farming. He has left his family behind in Koochbehar, but he regularly sends money home. He does not own a loom. When he first came over to Fulia, a distant nephew of his was already working here who has also married a Basak girl (this is still an unusual occurrence. Basaks tend to marry within Basaks). This nephew was settled with a loom of his own and had also accumulated some capital with which he wanted to expand his business and become a small mahajan. Thus Khagen easily found a position as an apprentice to work later as a "worker" for this nephew. This was in the mid to late seventies when the market for handloom sari, and specially Tangail sari, had started to take off. There was as much work as any one could want. But Khagen did not stay with his nephew for too long. A friend of his informed him of another mahajan who was looking for weavers who was going to pay forty rupees per cotton jacard-sari instead of the thirtyfive his nephew was paying him. He switched to him.

but that man was not a nice person. Though he did promise to pay forty rupees per sari, he was often late in paying and also his treatment of his weavers left a lot to be deserved. A worker-weaver customarily gets all his meals from the mahajan along with payment for the sari woven. It is a matter of honor for the mahajan to keep his workers well-fed, to offer them enough food so that they even leave some of it on their plates. But this man always kept a strict watch on how much was being given to the workers for food. He never let the workers ask for a second helping and he hardly ever had fish on the menu. So Khagen switched jobs again. Presently he is working with Suresh Basak. Khagen is a rather mediocre weaver who has not learnt to weave silk yet. So he has to stick to the cotton variety. Apart from weaving for Suresh Basak he also does some business on his own the way Narayan Basak does, i.e., collect extra saris from other weavers (he himself is not skilled enough to save yarn and still make the sari look alright) and sell it at a profit.

Gobinda Basak is a weaver who also makes designs for the cooperative. He came over to Fulia after the Bangladesh war. He was about twenty years old then. Even back in Tangail his father had a reputation for making good designs. He inherited his father's talent. These days when a good design fetches extra money at the market his talent

is serving him well.

I was speaking to Gobinda sitting in the front office room of the cooperative. He was showing me some of the designs he had recently made for the cooperative. Proudly he showed me some designs which have sold in large numbers. He lamented that even though his designed saris have sold in large numbers from the cooperative he does not earn any more than the regular salary from the office. Had he been working under some mahajan he could have raised his price. But he still wants to stay on with the cooperative. Jobs in the public sector are secure. Tantuja is honor bound to buy 80% of the stocks of the cooperative even if the market in Tangail sari ceases to exist from tomorrow. Gobinda has seen bad days in his life and he is not going to endanger his future for anything again. In his words:"do you know, I even had to do some menial job like digging the soil? Those were bad days! There was no yarn in the tanti's (weaver's) house. You could hear only sighs all around the village. We do not have any lakha-pora (writing-reading), we only know how to work the loom. If I knew some lakha-pora then would I be sitting here behind the loom? Then I would have been a bhadralok (gentleman). But we cannot be mute-mojur (loaders-menial workers) for that. We are tant-shilpis (loom-artists). We have to live with our looms."

Gobinda is not very respectful of the designs that are sent to the cooperatives from the office of

Tantuja. While he is respectful of the lakha-pora-jaana bhadralok (the gentlemen who knows writing-reading), the loom and details regarding its working is the weaver's area of expertise. In many subtle ways, he makes fun of the bhadralok artists in the city who try to help the weavers by making designs that are unfit for the loom. The city men have no knowledge of the loom. They only make paintings. If you are making a design to be woven on a sari you have to take care that after being woven the yarn of the design does not stretch over too large an area. If a design is woven that way then there is always the chance that the wearer may trip over by catching her toes in the long stretch of yarn on the border of the sari that falls near her feet. Another danger is that if the stretch is too long then it will crinkle up after the first wash and there goes the beauty of the sari. Sometimes the Tantuja people even send them colored designs. That is another problem. They think weaving is like painting. That any color can be woven on the loom the way it is painted. But on the loom yarns of different colors criss-cross to bring out a third color. It is a different mode of coloring. Often the colors they put on their painted designs cannot be brought out on the loom. Then the weavers have to figure out different combination of colors that are possible on the loom and will also look good on the sari. The tanti understands his tant. The shahorer babu (the city-man. Babu is an epithet commonly

used after the names of urban-middle class Bengali men. Sometimes it is used by itself to denote any anonymous city-man. It serves as a marker of ones urban-educated-middle class-masculine status) should leave the business of weaving with the tanti.

Rajen Basak is a young man in his early twenties. He was born in Fulia and has never seen Tangail. He has had his high schooling in Tangail, at the end of which he went for further technical training in weaving to a government school in Benaras. This school, like other technical programs of the government for the traditional artisans, is meant to train weavers in the theories and advanced technologies of weaving so that they are technologically well-equipped to take a part in improvising development programs for traditional arts and crafts. When we met him he was in Fulia on a vacation from school.

Rajen has learnt that there are three categories of designs, animal, floral and geometrical. Geometrical designs are found on jamdanis which are a product of the Islamic culture. It is forbidden in that culture to weave patterns of living beings, animals or humans. Animals and floral designs are found in traditional Hindu crafts, where these were often borrowed from ritual symbols. Thus lotus is the sign of Creation, owl is the sign of prosperity

being the carrier of goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, shankh (conch-shell) is blown on all ritual occasions to signify purity, thus we find the design of conch-shell on the sari borders and so forth. The specialty of Tangail weaving is its Finishing, where the woven sari is starched with a mixture of lime and fried pulses. This is what brings on the glaze and the smoothness of texture. It is called "sizing". Also initially the yarn is prepared by starching it with rice-starch. The advantage of this particular form of starching is that it sticks to the yarn very evenly. That makes for smoother weaving and also a better texture.

Rajen is not quite sure what he would like to do after he completes his technical training. He does not know what kind of jobs he would find. Possibly as a technical expert on weaving in one of the Weavers' Service Centers in the country. He would like to be posted in Calcutta, but there is no guarantee in government services.

Binoy Basak is one of the biggest mahajans in Fulia. Monday and Thursday are the two days of the week when he is to be found in Fulia. These are the days when he comes to Fulia to collect his saris and take them to Calcutta in his car. A remarkably handsome man in his late thirties, he is already one of the biggest of the mahajans in the area. Thus these days are also his busiest days. He sits down on

his gadi to collect saris early in the morning and the work goes on until late in the evening. However, unlike most other mahajans who treated me largely as "customer" (and therefore made themselves only into "sellers"), Binoy presents a more complicated persona. He is clearly aware of the fact that he is a tanti vis a vis the city-people (which is us), yet he has been able to stylistically assimilate his tanti identity with a certain art of self-presentation which is essentially that of the city. Unlike other Tangail Basak mahajans, he never appears in front of anybody from the city wearing a lungi (a piece of cloth that men wear around their waist that falls upto the ankle. It is socially associated with a kind of rusticity/un-dress. When going to the city, all weavers change into pants). He wears a kurta-pajama, preferably of silk. Kurta-pajama is not the everyday wear for the ordinary city-men. It has the element of a careful dressy casualness about it. City-men wear it mostly on casual social occasions. While other tanti-mahajans are secure in their identities within the village community (they always wear a lungi) and put on the "guise" of a city-man by wearing pants to the city, Binoy avoids identifying with the normal/everyday at both places and stylistically positions himself in a space that is socially identified as non-work. That way he can problematize his tanti identity (which is directly related to "work") and at the same time not make the futile attempt

to appear as a "normal" city-man which does not fool anyone anyway (though he does not speak his Tangail dialect with the city-people, his accent gives him away. Again, he is different from other mahajans who are not self-conscious about their language). It also makes him more acceptable (and therefore trusted) to his city-customers. Essentially, he has created a space where he is constantly dis-ordering the culturally-historically ordered space (higher caste/lower caste, urban/rural, educated/uneducated) which is dominated by the urban-middle class Bengali men, the bhadralok, and their alter-ego, the bhadramahila. If he had been an "authentic" tanti in his presentation of his self, he would have been treated by the bhadralok customers with the superior untrusting distance: i.e., either as the "simple", "more natural" village-person and therefore with condescension mixed with affection, or as the "other" who has to be contained so as not to threaten the existence of the self, which here takes the form of absolute distrust of the meaning/value of the commodity presented by him. But with his rather undefined style of presentation he creates a space of undefined relation with his city-customers who are either enticed by the possibility of the existence of a trusting relation with him (in this context, that he will sell his saris at the "right" price to them. This helpes him in promoting his sale by assuring a special sari at the "right" price) or suspicious of his "inauthenticity" (that

is, perceiving him as the tanti-who-tries-to-pose-as-the-bhadralok).

As usual, Binoy is very busy inspecting saris brought in by his weavers. The process is time-consuming. Each sari is inspected individually before being passed. Though there is one degree of standardization in woven saris imposed by the breadth of the loom, the rest of it cannot be supervised at all during the process of production. As we already know, weavers may put in less yarn in a sari than is desirable. Or they may not do the starching at the end very well. This is often a problem with "workers" from Koochbehar who, either due to lack of familiarity with the technique or due to lack of pride in the caste- occupation, often do not do the work well. Or in a jamdani sari the embroidery may not be dense enough. Thus, inspecting each sari separately is the only means of ensuring some degree of standardization. However, as we have already known, only very limited control can be exercised over the material production and distribution of Tangail saris.

Binoy, in his usual polite style, did not decline my request to talk about himself. He asked me to sit next to him on the gadi. He would speak as he does his work. He ordered one of his servants to go inside the house to order some tea (a city gesture of politeness that most weavers do not practice). He started to speak in between scolding this or that weaver or sketching out a design.

He started out very poor. Like any other weaver. He, with three other brothers of his, had crossed the border a couple of years before the Bangladesh war. After coming to Fulia, he and his brothers started to work for mahajans. Binoy would have had the fate of all other weavers had he not had the determination to make it big. The only way to break out of the clutches of mahajans and to become one oneself is to amass enough money to buy some extra looms to rent out to other weavers. Binoy collected the necessary amount of capital to buy two extra looms by collecting extra saris from other weavers and peddling them on the streets of Calcutta. Those were hard days. He would leave the village even before it was light and would not come back until it was midnight. And all this work had to be done after doing the necessary weaving to supply to the mahajan. After he bought two looms for himself he became relatively free.

Financial success came to him only after a period of hard struggle of getting his saris sold through the Barabazaar wholesellers. Like anybody associated with weaving, he has to find someone who will buy his stock at a regular interval so that he can keep his looms running. In those days, in the early seventies, Barabazaar wholesellers were the only people available for that. These wholesellers are terrible crooks! They know how to cheat a weaver of his money! And when the weaver has no other option what can he

do? Binoy had felt deeply insulted several times by the treatment of these people.

But dealings with Barabazaar people taught him many of the ropes of the business. He knows which shops in Calcutta buy on wholesale from Barabazaar. In Barabazaar people buy saris in pile. You do not get any special saris there. Buy a sari from Barabazaar and next day you will find ten other women wearing the same sari. All those sidewalk sari sellers buy from Barabazaar. Even big shops like Dhakeswari Bastralaya, Amrita Bastralaya, Benarasi Palace buy from Barabazaar most of the time. People do not know, so they buy the same sari at a higher price from Dhakeswari Bastralaya that they could have bought from Barabazaar. You know why saris are found to be cheap at Barabazaar? There the weavers who bring their saris are people who set a loom for 50 pieces of sari of the same design, and then they keep on repeating the same designs. Naturally their costs are lower. They do not care for any innovation in designs. Keep alternating between the same three or four designs. When Binoy was new in the business he took so much care to make good designs! To get some idea of the taste of the city people he would often walk the streets of the city just to look at the designs on saris on display on the windows of big shops. Then coming back home at night he would try to use those ideas to make attractive designs. He knew he was in a different world, a world that needed a

different performance from the one they were used to back in Tangail.

Financial fortune smiled on Binoy when one day he had gone to Shantipur to look up some designs from a designer there and ran into the owner of the big sari shop on Russell Street. The man had come to this designer to ask him if he knew any good and reliable weaver who can weave special designs. The weaver had to be exceptionally good because they were planning on a long term contract to weave very special, exclusive saris. Binoy was at the right place at the right time. With this one connection he also made many other connections in high places. He has never looked back since then. By that time the market for Tangail sari was also opening up with government putting in enormous effort into the publicity and sale of handloom. Handloom sari shops were mushrooming along with many women getting into a home-business in saris. He now owns a two storey house in Fulia and a car with big plots of land that he leases out as an additional source of income.

The problems in Binoy's life now comes from trying to keep his three-hundred-loom business running smoothly. Shortage of cash is a perennial problem. So Binoy is compelled to be always on the lookout for new business. New business means adding more looms to his concern. With growth in the number of looms the need for cash keeps on increasing. He has to keep looking out for new business.

Thus the cycle moves on. Binoy is perfectly realistic about his subordinate position in relation to the city wholesellers. As he is wont to say very prophetically:"we are tantis and we shall have to keep on being tantis." In his life, he has learnt to deal with this handicap by cultivating a style that allows him a space in the dominating discourse. He takes enough care to keep innovating new designs. He has a man on permanent salary whose job is only to think of new designs. Binoy is very careful about his designs. He never lets even his designer to take the designs home. He has also established a factory of his own for coloring yarn. He tries to keep as much check as he can on his weavers so that his designs do not leak out. He pays them at a higher rate than other mahajans. He does not produce more than fifteen to twenty pieces of the same design. If it is a really exclusive design then even fewer.

The story of the Tangail weavers is epitomized by the story of Binoy Basak. He has "succeeded" in the alien world of the city. The "Tangail" weavers as a community has succeeded in keeping their jat-byabsha alive. The irony lies in the meaning that this success has for their lives and identities.

The discourse of jat (caste), inter-marriage, strong social bonds (even if exploitative), productive activity

functionally bound within the confines of a village community, a particular style of weaving handed down through generations, a kind of isolation from the world outside of the village, all these factors together gave meaning to the historical existence of the weavers which they signified by the name "weaver of Tangail" (Tangailer tanti). Even after relocating to a different land a deep sense of identity derived from their association with the loom prevented them from taking up work of "digging the soil" which, in their eyes, was work of low prestige. The repeated references to the bad days and the spectre of having to "dig the soil" speaks of their sense of self (even if sometimes "digging the soil" is used by the narrator as a rhetorical opposition with not much historical-factual content to it). A tanti is constituted of the handed-down-through-generations skills and techniques which are considered to be more than the mechanical knowledge of knowing how to "pull the maku". One may weave, as many people from Koochbehar are doing, but so far as a Tangail Basak is concerned, one cannot become a tanti, one just have to be one. Particularly noticeable is Gobinda Basak's recounting of the "bad old days" when there was "no yarn in the tanti's house". It is not just any house, nor is it "our" house. The "house" is to be recognized as that of the tanti, not only just as one who weaves, but one whose life's experiences are understood and

expressed in the terms of the tant. Not having yarn in the house obviously has a direct economic significance, but the phrasing of it is clearly indicative of the unbreakable bond between the yarn and the "tanti's house".

In the market for handloom saris in the late twentieth century Calcutta, the product of the life-experience of the "Tangail weaver" assumes many different meanings (as we have already seen). Within the discourse of Fashion, each and every Tangail sari is read for a sign of distinction. The historical-experiential meaning to the tanti of the sign "Tangail" does not get carried over to the market. The tanti's voice is not heard in the city. A mutual construction of an Other on the side of the tanti and on the side of the bhadralok (with the bhadralok setting the terms of it) discursively excludes the tanti from speaking to the bhadralok except in the "language" of the bhadralok. The language of the bhadralok, which is essentially the language of modernity/aestheticism/objectification, is also taught to the weavers these days. Rajen Basak is well-versed in the different typologies of designs (animal, floral, geometric) from the weaving-school he goes to. It is not as if the idea of art and artistry is alien to the Tangail weaver. He is quite proud of his shilpa (art), but the indigenous meaning of shilpa is not the same as the modernistic concept of unique meaning of the objectified art deriving

from its "origin", the individuated consciousness of the "artist". In the experience of the indigent, shilpa is a style of practice among a particular group of people that can be perfected in its own terms. A good shilpi (artist)-weaver can weave a piece of art in terms of his weaving skill that is part of his social identity. This identity is not that of the marginalized artist of the modern days.

In the discourse of modernity/capitalism/fashion the sign "Tangail" is a myth, a sign of a Fashion/Tradition to mark Modernity. The commodity is a fetishised form of the Art within Tradition that is the Other of Modernity. The weaver is written as the Artist of the Art.

The form of defence/resistance the weaver can practice (and does) within this discourse is embodied in the figure of Binoy Basak. The way he has "succeeded" in a historically lost battle (and this is true of Tangail weavers as a community) is by appropriating the sign imposed upon him, the Artist, and turning it into a performance of telling stories about the singularity of his work (saris) to his customers. His "success" is directly related to the artistic success of his performance with which he dis-orders the socio-historical space that compels him to perform. The care he takes to keep producing distinction in his designs is part of his attempts at telling these stories. Condemned to be Artists, the weaver has to keep running in order to be at the same place.

The discourse of "Tangail sari" in the market in general is a story of telling stories in this sense. Handloom sari has always been a commodity. What is new about the present times is the way the meaning of this commodity is being constructed. In earlier days, the meaning of the commodity came with its association with known social relations (a regular shop where one "knows" the seller, a "known" weaver who comes to your house, a Shantipuri sari that is "known" by its design etc). The all pervasive sense of anxiety regarding meanings of saris (specially Tangail saris) that is sought to be controlled by looking for the "right" price, the "knowledge" about authenticity derived from a past or that of an "authority" that legitimizes the present day object can be read as attempts to cope with a world that is increasingly becoming unknown to the consumer. Shops are mushrooming everywhere. It is even entering the known-world of kinship relations and neighbors. Knowledge is being offered through the fashion literature, the advertisements. The Tangail weavers are willy-nilly part of this world in so far as they have to sell their works (that is, themselves). The stories that make "Tangail saris" (some of which we have heard in previous chapters) can be told as the story of the performance of the Tangail weavers. The performance to keep distinctions alive, being complicit to a discourse that produces their work as a fetish, and the same time

problematizing, dis-ordering the order of distinction itself.

ENDNOTES:

1. The relevance of caste-identity in understanding the social organization among the weavers of Tangail is undeniable. As I have made amply clear in my description, the Tangail weaver derives his pride in his weaving skill from his sense of his identity as a Basak, a name that signifies a weaving-caste.

   The issue of caste-identity and its significance, however, has to be seen in the context of the question that one is asking about meaning of social practice in India. The increasing importance of metropolitan centers of culture in producing different forms of public culture in India is an indisputable social fact. I am using "public culture" here in the sense in which Appadurai and Breckenridge use it. To quote them: "As forms, they are emerging everywhere: films, packaged tours, specialized restaurants, video-cassettes and sports spectacles seem to be drawing the world into a disturbing commercial sameness. But as vehicles for cultural significance and the creation of group identities, every society appears to bring to these forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncracies". (Apparadurai and Breckenridge.1988. "Why Public Culture?" Public Culture, vol 1 # 1:5) Following this definition, I am treating the commercialization of handwoven textiles (of which sari is one) as a form of public culture, in the sense that the market in handwoven saris is quite similar in its style of functioning to markets in clothing in the West, yet the signs and the images that are used in producing this commodity as a culturally meaningful object is historically specific.

   To study public culture, however, one has to think anew the concept of "culture" as has been traditionally conceptualized in anthropology and history, where it was "designed for small-scale, well-bounded and stable societies"(Appadurai and Breckenridge: 7). In the case of India the outcome of it has been that the locally bounded caste-organizations have received most attention (though there have been important minority voices) as providing the ideological framework to understand the functioning of Indian culture."...when India is referred to in the central zones of anthropological theory, it is rarely that caste and hierarchy are not the sole points of interest. "Appadurai 1986."Center and Periphery in Anthropological Theory". Comparative Studies in Society

and History, vol 28 # 2). It is in this sense that I do not treat caste as the central organizing concept for my thesis. Commercialization of handwoven saris as a form of public culture does need to take into account the social-cultural organization among the weavers, but it also has to recognize the larger national or regional institutions (both government and private) that play and have played an active role in producing cultural meanings and the practitioners of those meanings in metropolitan areas that also serve as the market for the weaver's product.

2. Krittibash was a Bengali poet who lived before colonialism and had translated the Indian epic Ramayana in Bengali, i.e., in the Bengali language that was before Modernism set in and the language was restructured. However, most people in Fulia refer to him as the poet who had written the Ramayana.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STORY OF THE STORYTELLER

The story told so far is about people narrating the commodity Tangail sari in different ways. Such story telling is still going on in Calcutta, but my story ends here.

To self-professedly tell a "story" within an academic-anthropological discourse demands an equally self-conscious positioning (or the lack of it) of ones self within the discourse. The discourse, conventionally, produces a subject-rational self (the anthropologist) vis a vis an object other (the Native/Culture/Ritual/History). The relation between the self and the other is sought to be forged by means of "knowledge" of the other by the self (as already defined within the logic of the discourse, the practice is unidirectional).

Stated in such "theoretical" terms, the historical specificities of the subject-self is ruled out of the discourse. Though this "theory" acknowledges an object called History, the same "theoretical" opposition between the knowing self and History is maintained within the discourse. An autonomous-knowing-independent subject is presupposed in any "knowledge" of History. In other words,

within this discourse, "knowledge" is unthinkable (and hence non-existent) without a transcendental subject. The technique employed by the discourse (at any rate in the non-critical aspect of it) to produce "knowledge", objective and certain, is to insert a wedge between the self and the other.

Of course, to use "knowledge" as a catchall term would invite protest from various quarters, signifying their mutual efforts to distinguish themselves from each other. The relation between the self and the other and the practice that bridges the gap by means of "knowledge" has been problematized differently by different schools. I shall here use as examples three modes of producing "knowledge" within the anthropological discourse: Structuralist, Marxist and Phenomenological. Naming the three schools as separate, again, will draw dissent from quarters that are engaged in fusing one or the other of these with a second (Structural Marxism, Marxist Phenomenology). But I shall avoid entering into the almost infinite debate of to what extent these modes are different and in what aspects they are similar. My purpose here is to establish that none of these modes provide an alternative to the self and the other dichotomy that "grounds" the anthropological discourse.

Structuralism, generally identified with the name of the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss, signifies a mode of

knowing that derives its method from the science of linguistic developed by de Saussure. Levi-Strauss developed his method of Structuralism as a critique of the then prevailing Empiricist school by asserting that cultures develop in accordance with the human mind's internal constraints and not simply, as held by the Empiricists, in response to external demands. The method itself, following de Saussure, treated human activities as the expression of some deep structure, a structure that can be deciphered if one scientifically analyses the surface expressions of it as manifested in various human activities (story-telling for one).

Though it makes a break with Empiricism, Stucturalism is rooted to the scientistic conception of the world (and the self's position in it) where a rational subject faces an object (a language, a culture, a myth, a ritual) that she then actively engages in understanding. The object, the other, does not in any way actively reciprocate this intellectual effort. "It" can be described/analysed in objective terms.

Marxism, directly associated with the name of its author, Karl Marx, was developed as a counter-discourse to the discourse of political-economy. It effectively subverted the latter by deconstructing the notion of the commodity by telling the story of exploitation of laborers by way of commoditizing the creative potential of laborers,

their labor-power. According to Marx's view, the way to scientific knowledge of the conditioning factors of human activities is by inquiring into the social relations that condition human labor, i.e., human activity of transforming nature.

Marx's entire notion of "exploitation" of labor, however, is based upon the Enlightenment view of the conscious subject (albeit a mystified and alienated one for Marx). The laborer is mystified into thinking that the commodity, which is nothing but a fetishised form of his own creative potentials, is an object, a separate entity that has a power over him. Hence the only way to true knowledge is to break through this mystification, to make the subject aware of his situation and thereby made free to reclaim a conscious existence. Once again, the individual-subject-self is on the center stage, actively understanding and thereby freeing himself from the bondage of non-knowledge.

Phenomenology, the third and the last mode of knowledge, adopts a self-reflexive stance with relation to subjective consciousness. It recognizes the embeddedness of thought in intersubjective language and transindividual framework. Perception, according to Merleau Ponty, actively participates in the creation of intentional objects. Thus "reality" does not signify simply a thing-in-itself that is transcendent to consciousness but rather forms the horizon

of possible knowledge.

Though Phenomenology thus problematizes the self-evidence of the distinction between the knowing subject and its object by arguing against the complete objectivity of the object and thereby the ability of the subject to completely transcend its context, like the first two modes it takes as its point of origin the conscious subject. This subject is constituted of and constitutes its own "objective" world, but at every moment its knowledge of the world stems from a subjective consciousness which keeps coming back to itself to reconstitute itself with the sense of its relation with the "world".

The question that none of these approaches ask (or rather cannot ask) and that which has become crucial for anthropologists (of any persuasion) to answer at this moment in global history, is: if the inquiring self happens to be non-western (of some variety) how does the fashioning of the other take place within the institutional discourse of Anglo-American academia? Historically, anthropology was born and brought up in a western socio-historical context and then sought to reject the history (by institutionally labeling and confining it as "History of Anthropological Theory") and make itself into a history-less practice that continuously reproduces itself by fashioning others of various kinds. How does a historically non-western self function within this discourse?

It is impossible to argue this point any further without making it more historically specific (since that is what is at issue here). Me, the teller of the just finished story (or is it finished yet?), is a female by gender, South Calcutta-Bengali by culture, western by education, the three being interlinked in a complicated manner. If this Bengali woman "does" anthropology, institutionally located in a graduate department of anthropology in the United States, what does she do? If the practice of anthropology is generically defined as searching for the other, socially-historically the west is one of her several others (in so far as she grew up in a "different" culture). Can she do an anthropology of this other in the epistemological terms of her "own" culture? No, not within the institution of Anthropology. If she has to "do" anthropology she has to be complicit to the western discourse of producing knowledge by employing techniques that are forged of western epistemology. The very reality of her performing within a western academic setting is testimony to the historical fact of her social complicity to it. She has had a western education. Is she then entirely "western"? The other of the western anthropologist is her other too? What about the irreducible essence of a culture then, the notion that underpins so much of anthropological literature? How can the discourse of anthropology accommodate this hybrid creature, in her

authenticity? Can she speak in her own voice and still do anthropology? Or does her existence subvert the anthropological discourse by questioning the very condition of continuity of the discipline, the essentialism of the otherness of the other?

This is where the enmeshing of the production of power and knowledge confronts us (anybody doing anthropology, western or non-western) most directly. Anthropological knowledge, which consists of anthropological writing, constitutes a complex academic institutional network that is embedded in a larger political-historical complex. Production of anthropological knowledge is integrally linked with the obviously political-historical fact of the other being accessible. This accessibility is dependent on many specific, real conditioning factors such as availability of funding, the structure of research priorities, the problems considered valid for investigation at any particular time etc., all of which are part of political situations on many different levels and in many different contexts. But these immediate structuring conditions are all linked to the historical fact of a western ascendancy over the non-west that secured the non-west as an object of study for the westerner. Any knowledge of the non-west is implicated by this history. While this is not to claim that human knowledge can by no means be anything more than the socio-historical circumstances that

made it possible (in fact I believe it can very well be something more), it is to claim that there is no knowledge that is not implicated by its circumstances. Thus there is no pure knowledge of the anthropological other. Any knowledge bears the trace of the history that made it possible.

At this point I want to make it clear that I am using the terms "western" and "non-western" to denote an experience of the self that is constitutive of a psycho-socio-historical position. Along with white, a "western" self may very well be brown (or black or yellow) skinned. Same holds true of the non-western. What signifies the "western" is its predicament, that of the rational subject facing a passive-object world/other and which it then proceeds to know. The "non-western" self always has a janus-faced posture: it has already been constituted by the gaze of its other as the not-us within some kind of a power-relation. Yet within that power-relation it has to know itself in terms of the other (thus within the power-relation of colonialism in British India, some people came to be called by the British as the "educated natives". They were not-British, yet part of their identity derived from their knowledge of their selves in western terms). The non-western self is conscious of this predicament. The only way it can speak of itself (which is the other of its other and thereby part of its own other too) is in the language of

the other. It is forever implicated by its other. In that sense, it is not a "self" in the Enlightenment meaning of it, that of a coherent, unified entity. It is always multivocal.

The ever-present and complicated relation between power (embodied by the anthropologist, western or non-western) and knowledge (represented in anthropological writings) in anthropological literature is by now well researched and more or less respectably placed wihin the Anglo-American academia. What is, however, not so undisputed is the implication of these critiques for the practice of writing anthropology (the activity that produces anthropology as a body of knowledge, a "discipline", a system of producing power). Self-consciously critical ethnographies are now being written[1] and are appropriated within the discipline by labelling the performances as "critical texts" as opposed to more straightforward non-critical ethnographies. The point I am trying to make is that ethnography can be nothing but "critical" at this juncture in global history. Cultures are no longer spatially isolated, if they ever were. Near Okemos, a predominantly white middle class suburb in Lansing, Michigan, a Rite Aid drug store stands side by side with an Oriental Curios shop run by an oriental family (diverse cultures are lumped under the label "Orient" in the western epic of the other). On Park Street in Calcutta,

India a restaurant by the name of Tandur (derived from the word Tanduri, the name of a style of preparation of chicken claiming as its origin the high cuisine in mughal culture) stands on the same side of the street as a bookstore by the name of Oxford Bookstore. The familiar is constantly being implicated by the exotic, the exotic by the familiar. The other is showing up, without any coherence, essence or discipline, where the self believed was its own space. Clifford[2] writes about this so far silent, marginalized other caught up in the historical hurricane of modernity and appearing, quite out of the context (or at least what was understood to be the context until then), in the space of the "self". He does an ethnography of Williams' poem where the poet, having spotted a girl (Elsie) with a "dash of Indian blood" working as a maid in his suburban home, acutely realizes the predicament of modernity in her image. With a different historical vision, Clifford wants to make use of the image of this other to make "specific paths through modernity"[3]. Truly, these "paths", which are nothing but critical readings of western modernity, can only be specific. A unified vision of any "self" has become an illusion, and by implication that of the "other" too. Her very appearance changes the context and she appears in many disparate contexts. There can be no metanarratives of this other. Nor is she capable of making any metacommentary on her culture.

This scattered infiltration by the other is true of the anthropological space too. The self-conscious non-west is within the space of anthropology too, problematizing the self identity of Anthropology by wanting to do her own anthropology. She cannot be silent. While she redefines the context the context also defines her. She has to write a dissertation.

A point is in order here. Resistance to "critical" writing within the Anthropological discourse at the present juncture often points out that the very conception of the idea of an anthropology within a western culture was an expression of critical thinking. That anthropological activity in its very essence is critical. That it forever implicates the western self by the non-west. In that sense it should not make any difference whether the anthropological self is western or non-western. That is, within anthropology, the distinction western/non-western is invalid. The point, however, is this: any critical act (or any social act for that matter) is historically specific. The forms that anthropological criticism of western thinking had taken in earlier times spoke to the social tensions of their times. What the new era has problematized is the Enlightenment notion of a unified-rational self, the notion on which anthropology as a discipline is grounded. The point of origin for any dialogue between the other and the self was always the self, an individuated, apolitical,

active self. Thus, even before any dialogue could start as an inception of a potential critique the other was already produced as an alter-ego (without taking into account the historical relations that made the dialogue a possibility). Along with this notion of a unified self was the development of an idea of a separation of the personal from the political. These two notions together helped produce anthropology as a discipline that allowed for a kind of social criticism that never crossed the boundary of the "personal" (while social/cultural was perceived by anthropologists as constituting the personal, social/cultural was understood in its ideational form, entirely divorced from everyday practices in social-academic life that is orchestrated by historical-institutional structures, that is, political), and produced a representation of an other in the image of the self, a unified "culture". Critical thinking in the present time has subverted the Enlightenment notion of a unified, individuated self. Foucault has radically historicized the notion of the "self" as it has come to be constructed in the western world and developed the notion of "power" as a technique, a strategy, that operates through the implementation of certain social practice to "produce" socially identifiable bodies by means of producing "knowledge" of them. The bodies are then compelled to embody the "truth" about them. Derrida problematized the

notion of "writing" by way of deconstructing (and thereby inventing deconstruction as a critical technique) the hierarchy conventionally ascribed to the opposition speaking/writing, speech being considered the "origin" whereas "writing" merely a representation of it. By this logocentric logic, anthropological writing could be taken to be an unproblematized representation of some original speech-act that occured in the "field". This notion thus legitimized the power-technique called "anthropology" to keep producing bodies of others in the form of knowledge as writing. Problematization of the two notions of "knowledge" and "writing" is the fundamental difference with earlier criticisms within anthropology that justifies raising the question of the differences in the predicaments of the western and the non-western self in the political context of a postmodern culture. The performing non-western embodies the subversion of the western.

Me, the South-Calcutta Bengali female with a western education, historically predicated to perform within American-anthropological academia, thus embodies a critique, a subversion of Anthropology. Like Elsie in Williams' poem, her (and others like her) very presence in the space of the "self" is a critical act, a performance that tells stories from various angles. A "muddle of origins", she has no metanarrative to tell, no unified vision of a "Culture" visited. Her "specific path through

modernity" brings her to the position of a teller of "stories", of fashion, of the bhadramahila, of the weaver-artist, of isolated incidents in the sari-market in Calcutta. None of these accounts provide any completed picture of any whole. These are scenes glimpsed, incidents witnessed, people met on her "specific path", conditioned by her multiple selves.

A "story" is different from a "text" in that a "story" is told in a specific context, presupposing a specific audience. A "text" embodies its "truth" in itself (at least in the traditional notion of the text) which is spatially and temporally invariable. Its truth originates with the figure of the "author", a figure socially-institutionally produced, author-ized to write about some object. A story derives its meaning in the specificity of its context, that includes the relation of the listeners to the teller, and also the teller's position in relation to the reality of which she is telling. A story also explicitly acknowledges the "interest" of the teller in the telling of it. The interest lies in making certain connections between the listeners, herself, and that of which she is telling. It is of that interest I would like to speak now.

The stories told so far are about other people telling stories in their lives. Stories are told in advertisements of the realization of a dream-woman, of a village that is

"still there"; in fashion-writings about granny's days, the artistry of the weavers, the poetics of the beauties of saris. Stories are told by Bengali bhadramahilas about Tangail saris and buying them. Stories are told by the Tangail weavers about "good old days", "bad new days", the babu who does not know anything about weaving, about Tangail saris.

We understand the story-teller's predicament. A history of modernity-imperialism-capitalism has swept her (even though biologically the story-telling self may be male or female, I shall use the feminine pronoun to signify the feminine principle at work) up and brought her to a shore where she does not have any assured space. In the postmodern, neo-colonial, capitalistic space of the market of handloom saris in present day Calcutta, the bhadramahila as a consumer has very little sense of control, in the sense of definite knowledge, over the vast ocean of commodities (in this case Tangail saris) she confronts. There is no possibility of an Anthropology of the Culture of the bhadramahila as a consumer, as there is no unified principle, no system of knowledge, that each one of them can deploy to read the commodity-text confronting them. What there is is an active memory, "indissociable from the time of their acquisition and bear the marks of its particularities"[4]. Through various ways of telling, the women try to situate a Tangail sari in a specific cultural

memory, a memory they use to position themselves in a certain way faced with the ever proliferating commodity-culture. Thus, one claims special knowledge of Tangail sari because her mother was a connoisseur of saris, another finds a special meaning in saris bought from Gariahat market which were practically inaccessible to her until then because of complicated structural reasons, still another remembers the graceful authenticity of Bengali doore saris which her mother wore to amaze the governor in some foreign land. Some tries to find the meaning of a sari through its association with the cultural-aristocratic network of Rabindrasangeet singers, another through the network of her son's school, still another by applying the rules of sociality of a para which is a carry-over from a village culture. Taken together, the stories indicate a larger historical process of the development of a city with modernity, merger of people from various cultural backgrounds and their attempts at adjusting within the disciplinary grids set by modernity and an everyday life in a city. The laws of capitalism produces any object of consumption as a ubiquitous commodity. A Tangail sari is consistently signified by that sign. That is, according to the logic of the commodity system, consumers are potentially signified as "same" through the use of the commodity. However, the still-alive memories of that ubiquitous economic agent, the consumer, constantly seeks

to evade that grid, to tell her own story, inscribing it on other stories about the commodity by deploying the symbolic capital available to her. Through her practice, her performance of telling stories, she positions herself in the emergent class-fractions as she perceives them. At the same time, her symbolic capital, a product of a historical trajectory, produces her within the class-fraction that produced her. Rekha Sinha does not quite trust Binoy Basak because, she says, he is a "weaver fellow". Her way of telling her (his)story of coming from within the Bengali bhadralok class which constantly seeks to distinguish itself from the "hoi polloi" is by way of marking an other in him. However, one must not lose sight of the fact that her telling of this story does not only tell us of her history but it is also a practice, a performance on her part. It is a tactical[5] positioning of herself within an emergent context as she perceives it. Tangail saris, a sign of status in dress, marks relative status distinctions when it is read as more or less "exclusive" or "authentic". Such readings depend upon the perceived social relations between the seller and the buyer. Rekha Sinha, with her specific history of coming from the "Rabindrasangeet aristocracy", seeks to consolidate her social identity by reading inauthenticity in Binoy Basak and his saris, by telling the historical story of the social differences between the tanti and the bhadralok. History and practice thus come

together. Her neighbor, however, tells the story of the "secret" special collection of Binoy Basak with which she tries to mark her consumption with distinction. Thus different stories are told about the "same" thing as tactics of making distinctions in a commodity-culture.

One point that emerges from so many different stories is that the social space in which this commodity is produced as a meaningful object cannot be depicted in any way as a space dominated by the consumers or the producers (weavers) or the intermediaries. There are only historical relations of domination and subordination produced within a colonial-capitalist history. A city grew up, along with a culturally-economically dominant class, within roughly a span of two hundred years, tearing apart many indigenous social relations and customs. In its wake came modernity, further complicating social relations. The new relations that were fashioned in this colonial-capitalist space were structured on the basis of the oppositions urban/rural, educated/uneducated, modern/traditional. Remnants, relics of social relations, cultural images, however, lived on as, aptly described by Walter Benjamin, "documents of civilization" which are at the same time "documents of barbarism". They flash up in situations when people try to create a space of their own, each in her own specific way, faced with the great equalizers and levellers, modernity and capitalism. The "market", the capitalist space par

excellence, is thus also a space where the anonymous continuously invent, from her memory, "ways of using" it, as a "means of resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations"[6].

Stories told by the weavers tell us the same story of resistance, making use of, a dominant modern-capitalist order. A complex and paradoxical history of nationalist thought and movement leading to the formation of a new "nation", a violent partition (partition of India and Pakistan in 1947), another violent event leading to a second partition (that of Bangladesh and Pakistan in 1971) integrated the Tangail weavers directly to the "market" the story of which is the subject of this work. The weavers' ways of making use of the order are multifarious. Their survival depends upon their being able to let their products tell the stories, to make their space with their products so that it is open to appropriation, to multiple readings. What the discourse of Truth, Standardization of Product, Contractual Honesty would produce as Dishonesty, can be seen in its own terms as the efforts of the dependent, the dominated to create a space where they can make their products tell different stories to different consumers. Or rather, to make the product amenable to use by the consumer for making different specific stories. They are the "non-western" in the land of the urban-middle class-<u>bhadralok</u>. Compelled by a culturally-economically

subordinated position, they can speak only in the language of the "west" if they have to be heard. They are the people for whom the tant (loom) signifies their jaat-byabsha (caste-business), a constellation of social-institutional relations experienced in the form of what Williams designates as "structure of feelings"[7] which seeks expression in its specificities through its work, its means of livelihood. Their works are truly "works of art" in their specific inventions. In the space of the modern-capitalist market, the Tangail weavers, performing and inventing "new semantic figures" (Katki-Tangail, Benarasi-Tangail, Chiffon-Tangail, Katan-Tangail) articulates the presence of this "structure of feelings". Modernity has objectified them, produced them as "artists". In order to survive, they have to speak within that discourse. They have to keep on producing themselves, as a social sign (tanti), a group, by producing "exclusives", "uniques", "singulars". From the stories we have heard, we know how exclusivity and singularity is read in a particular piece of commodity. The consumer brings her own specific historical trajectory to interpret the meaning of a sari and tries to integrate it in terms of her view of an emergent fractional class-relation. The tanti performs as a "poacher" in this space, in the sense in which de Certeau describes "everyday life" inventing itself "by poaching in countless ways on the property of the others"[8]. A consumer

with a trajectory described over "north-Calcutta conservatism" to "married-life in south-Calcutta" reads a jamdani sari at the shop Damayanti as being "subdued in color". Another, with a memory of a nationalist movement finds her kind of saris (whitish, sober) "anywhere", thereby denying any legitimacy to exclusivity. Still another finds authentic Tangail saris at the National Handloom House or at non-Bengali shops on Park Street. A fourth one finds reads sophistication in the saris at the Anando on Russell Street. A fifth one finds it with Kundahaar. The weaver, in his infinite inventiveness, makes all these different readings possible. In a "space instituted by others" (that is, the space of the city and the market dominated by the productive techniques of modernity and capitalism) their performances "characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have"[7].

Thus the Tangail weavers keep on telling stories: by infiltrating in the nooks and crannies of the lives of the modern bhadralok (they are there with the next-door-neighbor who has recently started a sari-business, in the Tantuja shop that has opened five-minutes from your home, with the sari-peddler who sometimes tries to sell to you, at the exhibition in Park Hotel, with the sidewalk sari-

seller, in the exclusive sari-shops of Calcutta), they keep up their resistance to being reduced to an unproblematic commodity, completely in the clutches of a modern-capitalistic system by being produced within it as a form of definite knowledge. Though the weavers are "in fact" dominated by a capitalist system (after all, they are financially dependent on the capitalist wholesellers in the city market), the system does not have complete control over them in the sense that it does not directly discipline the process of production (which is the means by which surveillance is carried out under a factory system). By constantly varying their production (sometimes actually, sometimes by telling stories about it) they keep creating spaces for themselves in the modern city-world by allowing consumers to make stories about them. In their "own" world, in Fulia, they tell many other stories, as we have already heard, which make them keep a sense of a social-identity alive. They have invented a way of living, and a way of telling about it, that keep telling the story of "Tangail". This is not to say that the memory of "Tangail" will forever be alive. Most likely in the next generation they will be telling stories about something else. A story, after all, has a time and a place.

We may now look at the flip-side of the weavers' resistance to being entirely appropriated by the capitalist financial network. As we have already known, a substantial

fraction of the Tangail weavers' production is subsidized and bought by the government. Present day government policy is a direct outcome of the nationalist movement when handspun and handwoven cloth acquired a radical significance. Gandhi's critique of British rule in India pointed at the inherent evil in a system of production where ever-increasing consumption constantly has to chase ever-increasing production. This system logically implies a thrust towards industrialization which in its turn implies a subordination of the countryside to the urban economy, an exploitation of the villagers and the village economy. Since Gandhi was arguing in a colonial context, it meant that industrialization under colonialism will lead to further draining of indigenous resources to the colonial coiffure. However, his admonitions were meant to hold more universally. His vision of a peaceful and prosperous independent India was one where the villages were self-sufficient. His was a moral injunction against industrialization. It is not necessary here to enter into all the contradictions and complications in Gandhi's thoughts about the moral and economic justifiability of handspun and handwoven cloth (khadi). What is of relevance for my story is the fact that following Gandhi's political initiative in promoting it, khadi became a symbol for the nationalist movement. Political focus came to be fixed more directly on indigenous handwoven clothing with the swadeshi

movement associated with the partitioning of Bengal between 1905 and 1910. Bayly[10] argues that through these movements handwoven cloth became invested with many politically charged symbols which drew upon many traditional symbolisms associated with clothing, such as a notion of protection as an element of transactions in cloth and clothing.

After political independence was attained in 1947, some parts of the logic of development of indigenous handicraft and handloom was retained in the political philosophy of the new nation. Development of cottage and handloom industry became one of the agendas in the five year plans in India. With the objective of providing economic and social benefits to the craftsmen of the nation, the government set up the All India Handicrafts Board to take care of the problem of developing indigenous handicrafts. In the Sixth plan (1980-81 to 84-85) Rs 65.65 crores have been laid out for development of handicrafts in the states. As part of its developmental project, the Board has established Regional Design Centers in every state whose responsibility is to study traditional crafts of the region, to document traditional designs for purposes of promotion and evolving new designs. With the object of popularising new designs and new techniques of production, the centers organise special demonstrations, displays and exhibitions. In Ahmedabad, there is the National Center of Textile Designs which is considered to have the best

collection of designs of traditional textiles all over India and is also an important center for research on textile designs.[11]

The connection between the functioning of state apparatus and production of a social body of knowledge has been adequately demonstrated by Foucault. A detailed study of how these state apparatus produce bodies of knowledge on handloom weavers in India awaits another researcher. I want to make a point here by drawing upon Chatterjee's work[12] showing the necessarily paradoxical character of nationalist thought in India that eventually led to the formation of the Indian state. The paradox is the same as that inherent in the position of any non-western thought that makes an active effort to speak to the west from a position of political consciousness. It has no option but to speak itself in the language of the west. But at the same time it is aware of the inequality of the relation within which the very foreignness of the language foils any success in the effort. Chatterjee follows the contradictory logic of the inception of nationalist thought in India through its tortuous paths, diversions and detours to its "logical" conclusion, the formation of India as a nation-state. In its inception it tried to argue for equality by invoking the notion of its "history" (a notion learnt from the rulers) that it imagined provided it with its own identity which it then sought to improve by acquiring

western "materialist knowledge". The inherent contradiction of such an idea of a national "self", along with its unavoidable elitism (it were the elites who had to interact directly with the west) led to the formation of a state where the political domain was split into two, "one, a politics of the elite, and the other, a politics of the subaltern classes"[13] as a rational consequence of an ideological distinction in mature nationalist thought between "a domain of rationality and a domain of unreason, a domain of science and a domain of faith"[14].

Postnationalist class distinctions and their social expressions as we have found in the space of handloom saris reflects this logic. The subaltern, the weaver, is produced as the other of elitist modernity. Modernity seeks its complement in its other. If modernity is urbanity/industrialization, its other is village/arts and crafts. This historical formation of power-relation produces, through various state and media apparatus, the weavers (and other artisans) as "artists". While the weavers keep telling away their many stories, they also keep reproducing the power that produced them. The present day space of market, a historical form of social exchange, is compelling the weaver to keep on practicing his art of story-telling (or let others make stories). He has to keep on running to be at the same place. The more interesting historical question is: can he someday invent a different

story that will change the story of modernity?

"...the allegory of salvage is deeply ingrained....it is built into the conception and practice of ethnography as a process of writing"[15]. If, however, following Derrida we problematize the ontological status of writing that it has in western culture, salvation of some about-to-be-lost experience of fieldwork in the form of ethnographic writing-up of it becomes problematic.

Telling a story about telling stories is one way of acknowledging this problem and rethinking ethnographic writing. Given the varied historical specificities of the moments of encounters (between the anthropologist and the "people") that constitute "fieldwork", all that can be "salvaged" (if one still wants to use that as the allegory) are those stories in which history is being brought into performance as so many different memories. Any social encounter between "us" and "them", between the west and the non-west (in the context of fieldwork, that is the relation between the anthropologist and the people) gives off stories, since in a context that is inscribed on a historically formed relation of power the one form of resistance that the non-west can practice is that of telling story. The figure of the anthropologist, the south-Calcutta woman who is also "from America", clearly embodies a power-relation not only to the weavers (as belonging to

the bhadralok class, knowing writing-reading) but also to the city-women (she is "from America"). She had to weave many specific paths through the space of market-city-village and ended up with a bagfull of specific stories. The very historical specificity of the stories collected by her tells the story of her "self", which is nothing but a story about her other-self, the west.

Her "interest" in telling a story is precisely to direct attention to this predicament of a non-western within anthropology, an outcome of a historical contingency that
was built into the conception of Anthropology. This non-western has had western education. She has been taught to respect the Enlightened west's mission to restore the voice of the other. She still retains that respect. That is why she is interested in joining in the anthropological act of rethinking ethnography by telling her ethnographic story.

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2. Clifford,J.
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3. Ibid, page 5.

4. de Certeau, M.
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5. I am using "tactic" in the sense de Certeau (1984, p xix) uses it to distinguish it from "strategy". According to this distinction, strategy is the "calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an environment", whereas a tactic "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances."

6. de Certeau, M. Ibid, page 18.

7. Williams,R.
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8. de Certeau (1984), page xii.

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13. Chatterjee (1986), page 153.

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