

Rethinking Gender History

Essays on Northeast India and Beyond



Edited by

Manorama Sharma



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Chapter - VII

A Past of her own: Sifting the women from men in Colonial Assam

Mahua Bhattacharjee

Archives as institutions and records as documents are generally seen by academic and other users, and by society generally, as passive resources to be exploited for various historical and cultural purposes. However, as feminists argue, the materials themselves were not meant to preserve women's lives and experiences and layers of interpretation and interrogation are required to find women in the historical record. Although interpretation of sources is complicated, especially when documents are not complete or historiographic information is limited, it is not impossible to find evidence of women's voices and actions in these records. This paper contends that it is possible to weave together fragmented and partial materials to form a picture of women's lives and here conventional archival data has been used to seek out women and their contribution to the rural economy of colonial Assam. The methodological strategies in the paper include "researching around" particular documents, reading materials "against the grain," weaving layers of information, looking for subtexts and silences, and using knowledge of context and historiography to situate the women's labour in the silk industry in colonial Assam specifically centered in the small town of Sualkuchi on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. It consists