Disparities in Human Development Attainment across Communities in Assam with Special Reference to the Scheduled Caste Community

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Abstract

In India, the two marginalized groups— Scheduled castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been suffering from discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream population since time immemorial. Disparities exist between these two groups and mainstream population in major human development components and socio-economic variables. The present study attempts to review the disparities in human development attainment across different communities in Assam with a special focus on the scheduled caste community. From the study it is found that the performance of SC community on human development front is almost satisfactory. The analysis of various development indicators show that the SC community is gradually catching up with the state average— suggesting that this community is starting to share the benefits of the process of human development.

Key Words: Disparity, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Human Development, Attainment.

1. Introduction: The twin concepts of 'deprivation and discrimination' are closely interlinked with caste and race. In Indian context, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are the marginalized social groups. Historically, these groups have been suffering from discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream population in economic and social spheres. Even after 68 years of independence, there is still visible inequality between marginalized (SCs and STs) and mainstream population in case of major human development components and socio- economic variables. Over the time period, the disparity between these two section of the people has been found to be decreased but at a slower pace. Disparities exist across states, along rural/urban lines and across groups, and hence addressing human development in India is of vital importance.

The scheduled caste population constitutes disadvantaged group, estimated at 16.6% of the total population of the country as per 2011 census. The sixth schedule of the constitution of India regarded the SCs populace as weaker fragment of the Indian class based society. The people of these castes are considered outcastes and categorised as untouchables. They remain at the bottom of social hierarchy and have been socially deprived, discriminated and

expired by the upper caste Hindus since the time immemorial due to historical disadvantage , majority of members of schedule castes having no access to basic resources of survival and growth , remain still deprived vis a vis. other socially dominant groups . Members of SCs in India existed under conditions of a hidden apartheid for centuries in a relatively stable system of caste. The economic status of the members of SCs reveals that they are the poorest of the poor population in basic resources over a historically defined period. Triply disadvantaged as they are, socially, culturally and politically, the members of SCs and the poorer section among them, have failed to get the benefit of whatever economic development of the people of India have so far gathered.

"Presently, the SCs in India constitute around 16.2 per cent of the total population. They constitute 45.60 per cent landless agricultural labourers and 20 per cent of the cultivators mostly in the category of the small and marginal farmers. Almost one – third live below poverty line and do not have access even to the basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter and constitute major part of labour force and are generally engaged in petty occupations like agriculture labour, construction work, hawking and other low grade jobs" (Census 2001).

The overall lower socio-economic position of the SCs, made the framers of the Constitution, to realise that unless some special provisions for safeguarding the interest of the segment of people is made, they will remain backward for centuries. As a result some specific provisions have been incorporated in the Constitution to provide social justice to the members of their castes through policy protective discrimination. As a result of these protective discriminating policies, no doubt, since Independence improvement in social and economic conditions has been recorded among these categories of the society, but the desirable outcome is still far away from the reality. The National Human Development Report 2001 therefore concludes —

"In India there is a considerable difference in the level of attainments of people of various aspects of wellbeing depending on their place of residence (i.e. weather the area is rural or urban), the sex of the person and social group of segment of the population (i.e. Scheduled Castes/ Tribes and others) that the person belongs to. In general, most indicators show a lower level of attainments for women and people residing in rural areas. The attainments levels for the Scheduled castes and the Scheduled Tribes are also lower than other on the available indicators. This aspect of development process has been captured both in the individual as well in the composite indicators" (India, HDR, 2001).

As in India, So in Assam, various studies have found that SC population is the disadvantaged group estimated at 7.2 per cent (2011 Census) of the total population. As per 2001 Census there are 16(sixteen) notified scheduled castes in Assam. These are Kaibartta (31.8 per cent), and Namasudra (30.4 per cent) are the two major SCs in the state sharing more than half of the total population. Other groups include patni (8.3 per cent), Jhalo (4.2 per cent), Muchi (3.9 per cent), Sutradhar (3.4 per cent), Bhuimali (3.2 per cent), Hira (3 per

cent), Dhupi (2.7 per cent), BrittalBania (2.6 per cent), and Jalkeot (1.3 per cent) also have sizeable population in the state. SCs namely Lalbegi, Mahara, Dugla, Mehtar, and Bansphor each accounts for less than one per cent of the total SC population. These people mainly engaged in non-agricultural activities such as fishing, gold smithy, carpentry, cloth washing, pottery making, sweeping, leather tanning etc. Thus, the scheduled caste population in the state stand in the ladder of the society in terms of various components of human development.

The present study thus attempts to review the disparities in human development attainment across different communities in Assam with a special focus on the scheduled caste community.

1.2. Scope, Objectives and Research Questions:
1.2.1 Scope:
The study is mainly confined to the SC community of Assam. As stated above, the choice of the SC community is for understanding the disparities in human development attainment of SC community in relation to other communities in Assam.

1.2.2   Objectives:
The study has the following objectives—
(i)   To study the disparities in human development attainment across different communities in Assam. A special focus will be on the relative attainment of the SC community.
(ii) To examine the extent to which the SC population in the state has been able to progress over time in terms of socio-economic indicators of development.

1.2.3 Research Question: The main research question motivating the study is whether over time there has been a convergence in development attainment of SC population with other population segment of the state.

1.3 Methodology: The data relating to the study have been developed from various official sources like the Population Census of India, Economic Survey of Assam, National Sample Survey, Indian Human Development Report 2011, Assam Human Development Report 2003, Planning Commission Reports, Books and Journals. Such data are useful for understanding the relative backwardness of SC community in comparison to other communities in Assam.

1.3.1 Analytical Framework: Quantitative data have been analysed using usual statistical tools like – ratios, percentages, averages, figures, graphs etc. Qualitative data were reported in narrative form.

2. Meaning and Measurement of Human Development: Historically, the well-being of a nation is measured in terms of per capita gross domestic product or per capita national product, more precisely in terms of income. "It was seen till sixties, economic growth was considered the principal objective of a government and per capita income is the most yardstick to measure human well-being" (Gopalkrishna, 2009:1). However, experience of the 50s and 60s, when a large number of third world countries achieved the overall growth

targets of the United Nations but the level of living of the masses of people remained for the most part unchanged, signalled that something was very wrong with the narrow definition of development. Ultimately, the inadequacy of income as a sole indicator of human well-being was realised. Therefore, a new approach of "development" has emerged after the publication of first Human Development Report in 1990 by the United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP). A very recent attempt in this respect is that of UNDP's (1990) Human Development Index (HDI). The concept of "human development" is more powerful and more comprehensive concept than the conventional measure of Gross National Product (GNP) in understanding human well-being.

The concept of human development has emerged in the late 1980s based on conceptual foundation provided by Dr. Amartya Sen and Dr. Mahbub Ul Haq. The human development approach puts people at the centre of the development agenda, where economic growth and wealth are considered means to development, not an end by itself. Put simply, the starting point for human development approach is the idea that the purpose of development is to improve human lives not only by enhancing income but also expanding the range of things that a person can be and can do, such as be healthy and well nourished, be knowledgeable and participate in community life.

Although development is desired universally, the meaning and measurement of development is not unanimously accepted. However, among the various interpretations of the term development, human development has become increasingly popular. The first UNDP's Human Development Report (HDR) 1990 defined human development as a "process of enlarging people's choices". To lead a long and healthy life, to be educated, and to enjoy a decent standard of living are the three most critical choices identified in the first HDR. Additional choices include political freedom, gruanteed human rights and self-respect. The HDI is a composite index of three indicators: education, health and income. The detail of the components and indicators of HDI as per HDR, 2010 is shown in the following table 2.1.

Table-2.1 Components and Indicators of Human Development Index

Sl. No.	Dimensions	Indicators
1.	Health	Life expectancy
2.	Education	Mean Years of schooling
		Expected Years of schooling
3.	Living Standard	Gross National Income Per Capita

Source: HDR, 2010

Since inception, Human Development Report has also added several new dimensions to the concept of human development from time to time. In HDR 2010, some modification has been made in the indicators (Table-2.1) used to measure the progress in education and income and change the way they are aggregated. In the knowledge dimension mean years of schooling replaces literacy and gross enrolment is recast as expected years of schooling—the years of schooling that a child can expect to receive given current enrolment rates. To

measure the standard of living, gross national income (GNI) per capita replaces gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (HDR, 2010:15).

Indeed, in various countries and regional studies, a set of human development indicators and even human development formula used are different from the UNDP formula. The differences are counted by limitations of availability of data and also the requirement of the country or the region. For example, in Assam in constructing HDI and GDI, UNDP's methodology was adopted, while different sets of HDI were computed taking into account additional variables. These indices offer insights not only with regard to the varying degrees of achievement in the human development across districts in three dimensions, i.e., health, education and income, but also portray the extent of inequality therein identifying areas of interventions in enlarging people's capabilities in making choices over various "functioning".

According to Human Development Report of India's (2010), "the GDP or income in general, is a means, though perhaps the most predominant one in obtaining valued 'outcomes' in the course of development. The human development indicators are more appropriate in capturing desirable 'outcomes' for which the means are ultimately engaged in the process of development" (NHDR, 2001:9). Hence these socio-economic indicators outlined by human Development Report of UNDP, have been generally accepted as a framework for assessing socio-economic attainment and well-being of individuals as well as society as a whole.

3. Development Attainment of Scheduled Caste Community in India and Assam: In this section an attempt has been made to compare the development attainment of SC community in Assam in as well as in India in comparison to other communities, in several development indicators, using available secondary data mostly from the census of India and Human Development Reports.

In order to trace out the attainment level of the SC community, various developments indicators based on the available comparable statistical data were classified under three broad categories:
   (i)   Demographic Indicators: Rural-urban composition, Sex ratio and access to health and civic amenities.
   (ii) Social Indicators: Literacy rate (as an educational attainment)
   (iii) Economic Indicators: Work force participation rate, occupational categories and poverty level.

3.2.1 Rural- Urban Composition: The rural-urban composition of population reflects on the pattern of living of the country's population. As in India, So in Assam, the majority of population lives in rural areas. But there is a growing trend for a gradual shift of population from rural to urban areas. The rural urban composition of SC population in Assam is shown in the Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Rural-Urban Composition of SC population (%) in Assam

Year	Rural	Urban
1991	86.7 (89)	12.4 (11)
2001	85 (87.1)	15 (12.8)
2011	81.82 (85.9)	18.18 (14.1)

Source: Census of India

Figure ( ) for Assam All

According to 1991 Census, the rural population of the SCs was 87.6 per cent of the total and for Assam as a whole it was 89 per cent. In 2001, the percentage of rural SC population was 85 per cent and the percentage of rural population for the state as a whole was 87.1 per cent. Again, in 2011, the percentage of rural SC population has decreased to 81.82 per cent, and for Assam as a whole it stood at 85.9 per cent. Thus it can be observed that over the period 1991-2011, the percentage of rural SC population has been decreasing at a faster rate than the state as a whole. The trend in rural-urban population among SCs in Assam is shown in the figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Trends in Rural-Urban Population among SCs in Assam
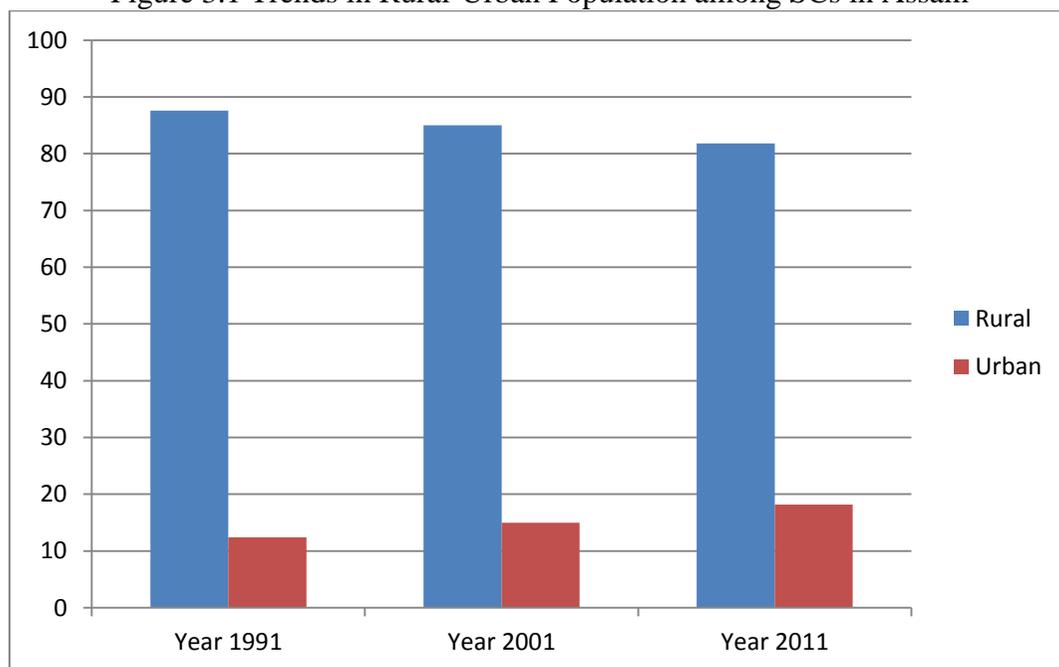
From the figure 3.1 it is seen that the urban population of the SCs in Assam has been increasing from 12.4 per cent in 1991 to 18.18 percent in 2011. Thus, the analysis clearly

indicates the fact that over time, there has been a growing trend for gradual shift of SC population from the rural to urban areas.

3.2.2 Sex Ratio: The sex ratio is defined as the number of females per thousand males. It is an important and useful indicator to assess relative excess or deficit of men or women in a given population at that point of time. "Sex ratio is a powerful indicator of the social health of any society as it conveys a great deal about the state of gender relations Patel" (2004:887).It is an important source to find the equality of males and females in a society at a given period of time. Improvement in sex ratio indicates a healthy growth rate among female to male population. "Sex ratio is a useful indicator to understand women's health and position in a society" (James, 2004: 1-12). Sex ratio is also an important variable for determining the quality of life and status of women in a society. "It is generally believed those discriminatory practices against, as well as a low age at birth result into high female mortality leading to a lower female sex ratio" (Devi, 2004). The sex ratio for SC population group in Assam is shown in the following Table-3.2.

Table-3.2 Sex Ratios among SCs in Assam

Year	Age 0-6	Over All
1991	968 (975)	908 (923)
2001	959 (965)	935 (935)
2011	936 (957)	948 (954)

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001 and 2011.

Figure ( ) for Assam All

From the Table it can be observed that there has been an improvement in the Over All sex ratios of the SCs as well as for Assam as a whole during the entire period 1991-2001. Again the Over All sex ratios among the SC population have improved at a faster rate than the all Assam sex ratios during the period 1991-2011.Another important fact is that the sex ratio of the age group 0-6 of the SCs as well as for Assam as a whole has declined between the period 1991 and 2011. On the other hand a matter of concern is that there has been a marked declined in the sex ratio of the age group 0-6 for Assam as a whole during the period 1991-2001. Therefore, we can say that there is lesser gender disparity among SC population in Assam as compared to the as a whole population.

Figure 3.2 Sex Ratios among SCs in Assam
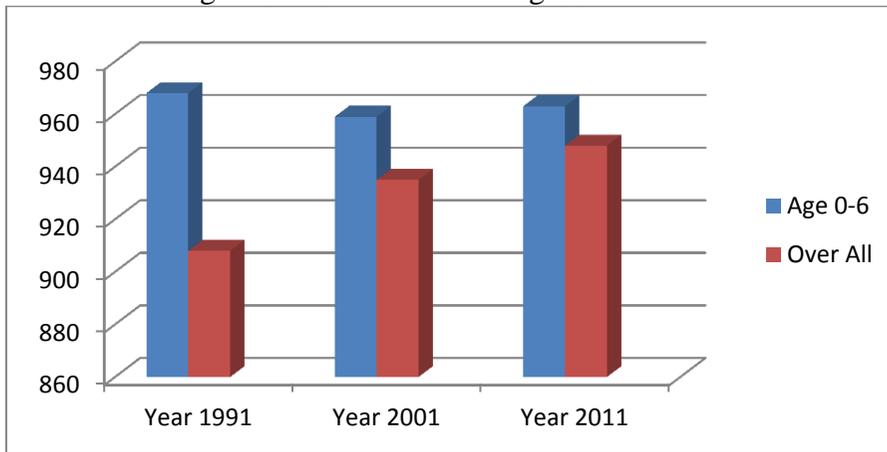
3.2.3 Attainment of Health and Civic Amenities:

"Health is an indicator of well-being that has immediate implications for the quality of life as well as for productive capacities and capabilities" (AHDR, 2003). The 'health' of a person or a group of people is a comprehensive concept that incorporates many dimensions, not just the absence of illness. In fact, the charter of the World Health Organisation (WHO) explicitly defines 'health' as a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence and infirmity'. The health status of a population is a multidimensional in nature and is difficult to measure precisely. It is captured through a range of indicators such as mortality, morbidity, nutritional status and life expectancy at birth. The present section details the performance of some health outcome indicators for different communities in Assam.

Figure 3.3 (A) Under Five Mortality Rate, Assam 2005-06
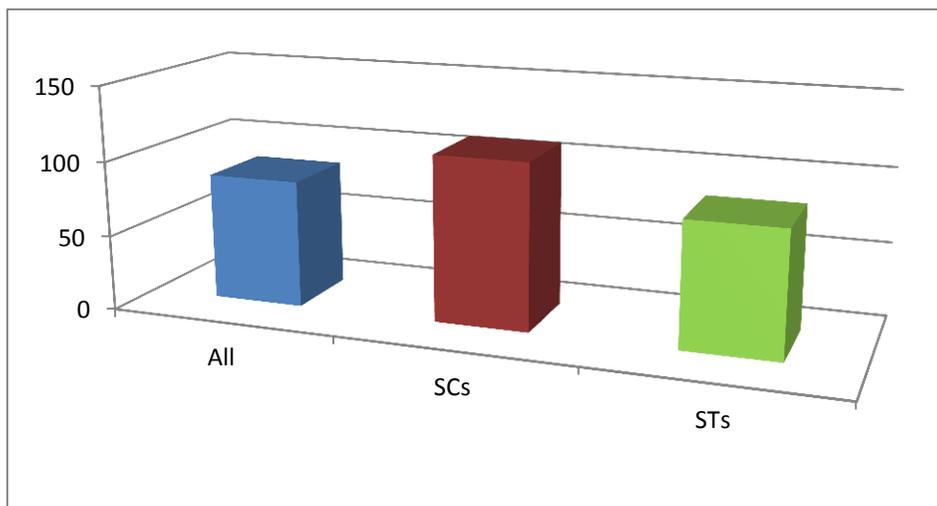
Source: NFHS 3

From the figure 3.3(A), it can be observed that under five mortality (which is the probability of children born in a specific period dying before reaching the age of five years) is higher among the SCs (110.7) as compared to STs (83.2) and the state as a whole (85). This seems to be due to the slower improvement in the health care services among the SCs and STs.

Another two important health indicators are − percentage of underweight children (0-5 years) and the Body Mass Index (BMI). From the figures 3.3(B) and 3.3(C), it is seen that percentage of underweight children among the SCs is much higher (43 per cent) as against 36.4 per cent for Assam as a whole and 18.2 per cent for STs. Again, the BMI<18.5 is also higher among SC women than that of STs and Assam as a whole. These disparities are a matter of concern as a mother's health status is intricately linked to the health status of child and society at large. The proximate determinant of child's health and nutritional status is caring capacity of the mother. The caring capacity of the mother depends upon her health, her physical capacity to breastfeed for an extended period, and her status in society. Therefore, women's health and nutritional status should be the foremost concern for a healthy society.

Figure 3.3(B) Percentage of Underweight Children (0-5 Years) in Assam, 2005-06.
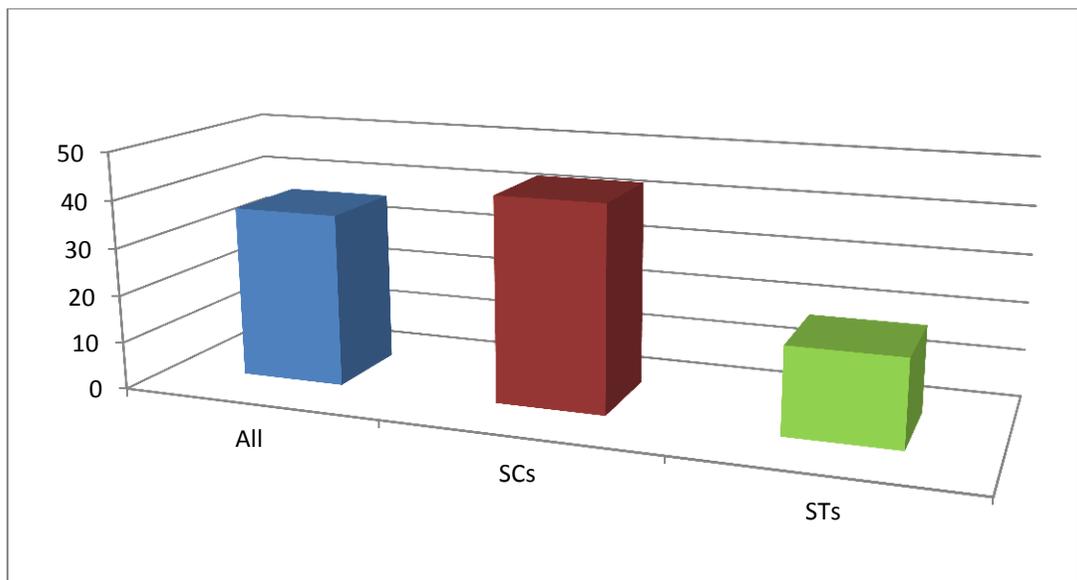

Source: NHFS 3

Figure 3.3 (C) Percentage of Women with BMI<18.5 in Assam, 2005-06.
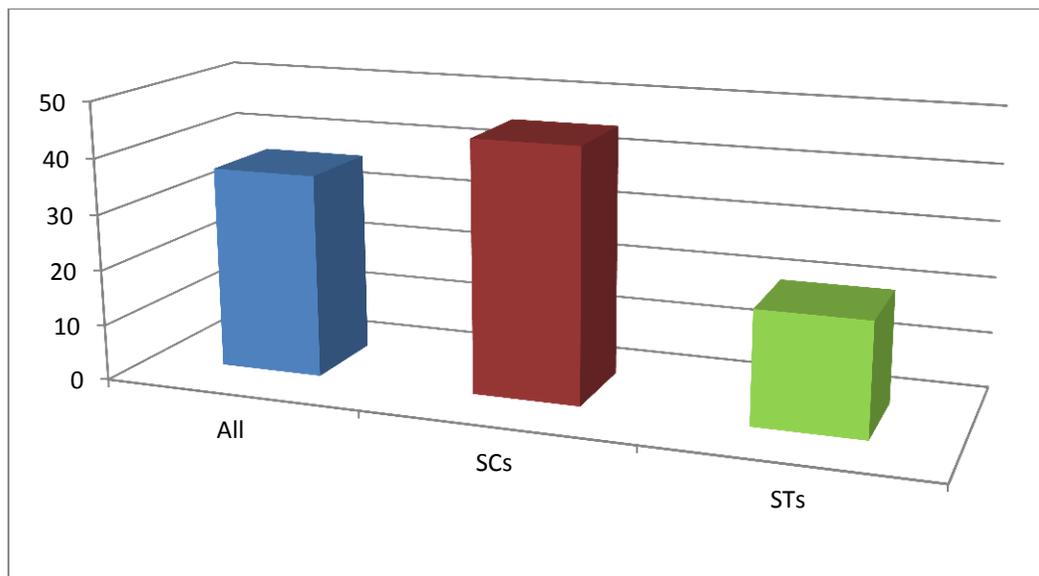

Source: NHFS 3

Again, in regard to the availability of civic amenities like drinking water [Figure 4.3(D)] and sanitation [Figure 4.3(E)], SCs are performing better than the STs and the state as a whole, suggesting that SCs are better placed than the STs as well as the state as a whole.

Figure 3.3 (D) Percentages of Households among SCs, STs and Assam All with Improved Source of Drinking Water, 2008-09
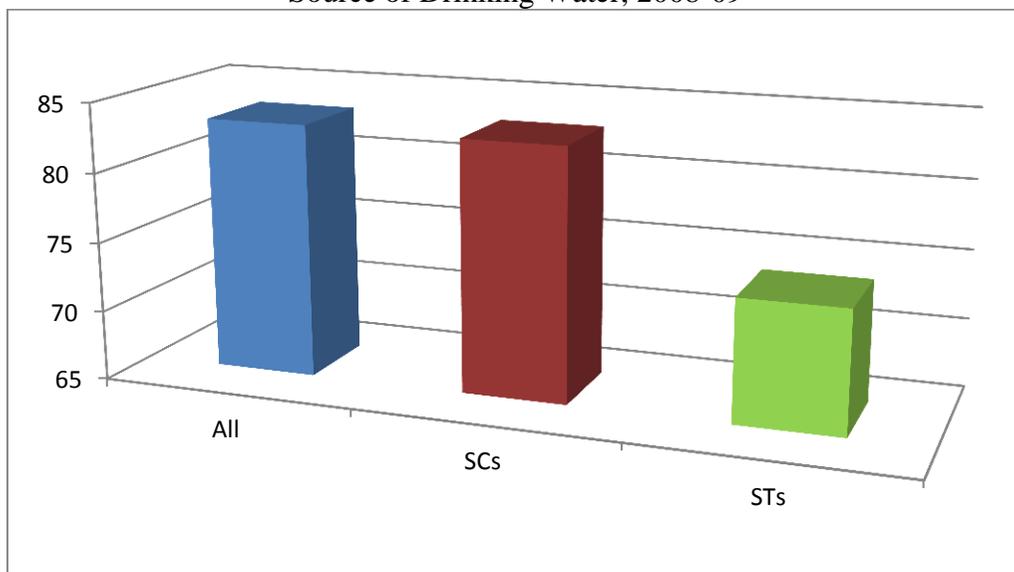
Source: NSS 65th Round

Figure 3.3 (E) Percentages of Households among SCs, STs and Assam All with no Toilet
Facility, 2008-09
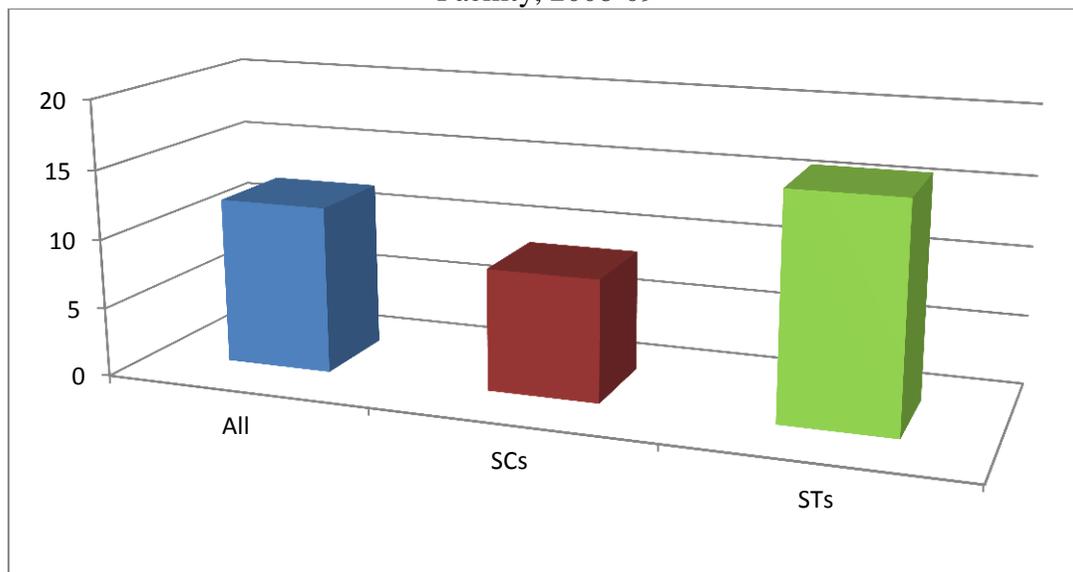
Source: NSS 65th Round

3.2.4Literacy Rate: As an Educational Attainment: Education is an essential component
of human resource development as it improves the knowledge among individuals.
Education is an important input as well as an outcome indicator influencing other
development indicators like health, nutritional status, income and family planning" (Pathak,
2009). "Among different parameters of educational attainments, literacy is the most
fundamental as it paves the way for further learning and training" (India, HDR, 2011). But
in our country, the spread of education is low as compared to the other developing countries
of the world. Literacy rate is defined as percentage of literates among the population in the
ages 7 years and above. The trend of literacy pattern among the Scheduled Caste population
in Assam is shown in the table 3.3.

Table-3.3 Literacy Rate among Major SCs in Assam

SL No.	Name of Scheduled Caste	Literacy Rate (7 Years and above)		
		Total	Male	Female
1	Bhuimali	72.2	79.8	64.0
2	BrittialBania	81.0	88.6	73.0
3	Dhupi	76.0	83.1	68.3
4	Hira	72.5	82.7	61.8
5	Jalkeot	69.3	78.9	58.8
6	Jhalo	52.8	64.3	40.3
7	Kaibartta	72.1	80.5	63.3
8	Muchi	42.9	60.4	34.2

9	Namasudra	60.2	70.1	49.4
10	Patni	75.9	81.5	69.9
11	Sutradhar	67.2	76.6	57.2
12	All S.C.	66.8	75.7	57.1

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, 2001.

From the Table-3.3, it is clear to us that the literacy among the SCs in Assam is 66.8 per cent, which is above the aggregated national figure for SCs (54.7 per cent). It can be seen that the male and female literacy rate are 75.7 per cent and 57.1 per cent respectively, and thus there is a gender gap in literacy. Brittal Bania have recorded the highest literacy rate of 81.0 per cent, closely followed by Dhupi (76.0 per cent). Patni (75.9 per cent), Hira (72.5 per cent) and Kaibartta (72.1 per cent). On the other hand, Muchi (47.9 per cent) and Jhalo (52.8 per cent) recorded very low rate of literacy.

3.2.4a Improvement Rate of Literacy: The improvement rate of literacy of SC population in Assam is shown in the table 3.3.1.

Table 3.3.1 Decadal Improvement of Literacy Rate among SCs in Assam

Period	Male	Female	Person
1971-1991	0.47 (0.66)	1.18 (1.20)	0.68 (0.84)
1991-2001	0.40 (0.15)	0.23 (0.26)	0.32 (0.19)
2001-2011	0.12 (0.09)	0.27 (0.21)	0.19 (0.14)

Source: calculated on the basis of Census Data, Primary Census Abstract 2011, Primary Census Abstract Part II-B (1991), 1971 Part (II).
Figure ( ) for Assam All

The improvement rate of literacy of the SCs in Assam is shown in table 3.3.1. It is observed that over the two decades 1971-1991, the literacy rate of the state as a whole improved at a faster rate than that of SC population. But in the recent decades, 1991-2011, the literacy rate among SCs has improved faster than the state as a whole. This implies that there has been a tendency towards convergence in the literacy rate SCs to the all Assam literacy rate.

Again, the improvement rate of male literacy was lower among the SCs than that of improvement rate of male literacy of the state as a whole in the past Census decades 1971-1991 as presented in figure 4.4.1. But in the recent Census decades, 1991-2011, the literacy rate among the male population of SCs has improved at a faster rate than that of Assam as a whole. On the other hand, from 1971 to 2001, improvement rate of female literacy among the SCs was lower than that of female improvement rate of literacy of Assam as a whole as shown in figure 4.4.2. However, the rate was higher for the SCs between the decades 2011-2011.

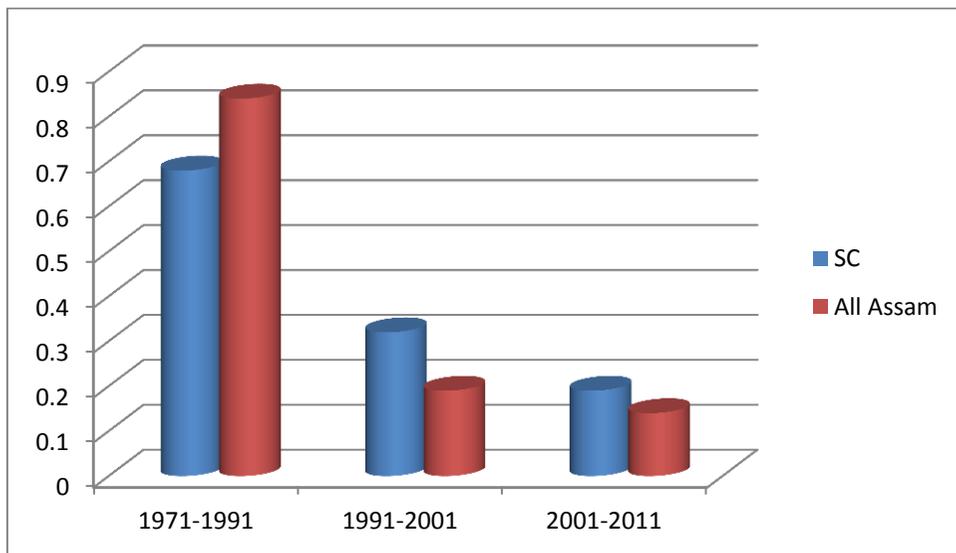Figure 3.4 Decadal Improvement Rate of Literacy among SCs in Assam

Figure 3.4.1 Decadal Improvement Rate of Male Literacy among SCs in Assam
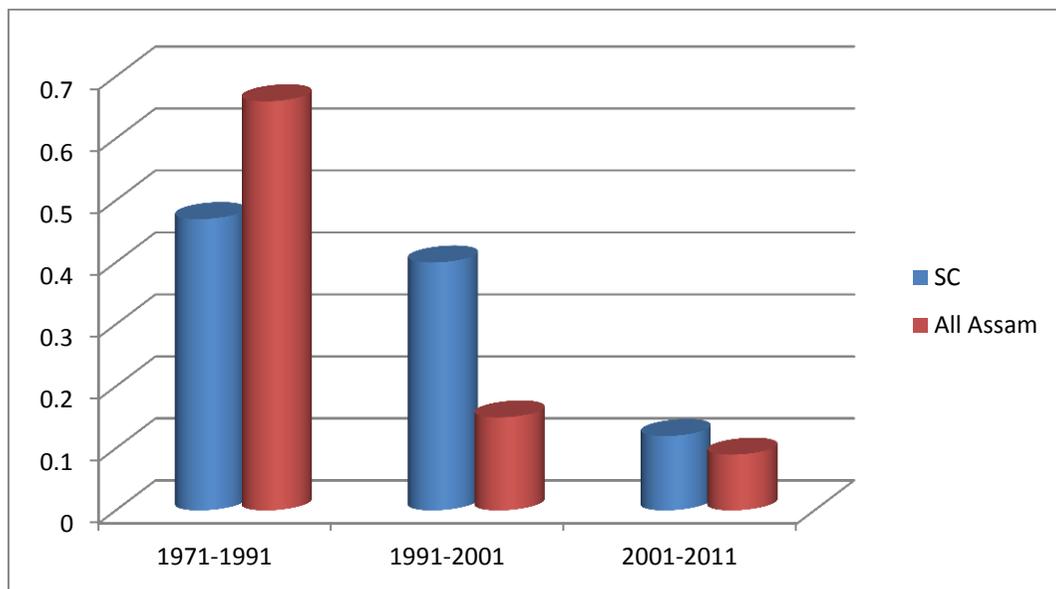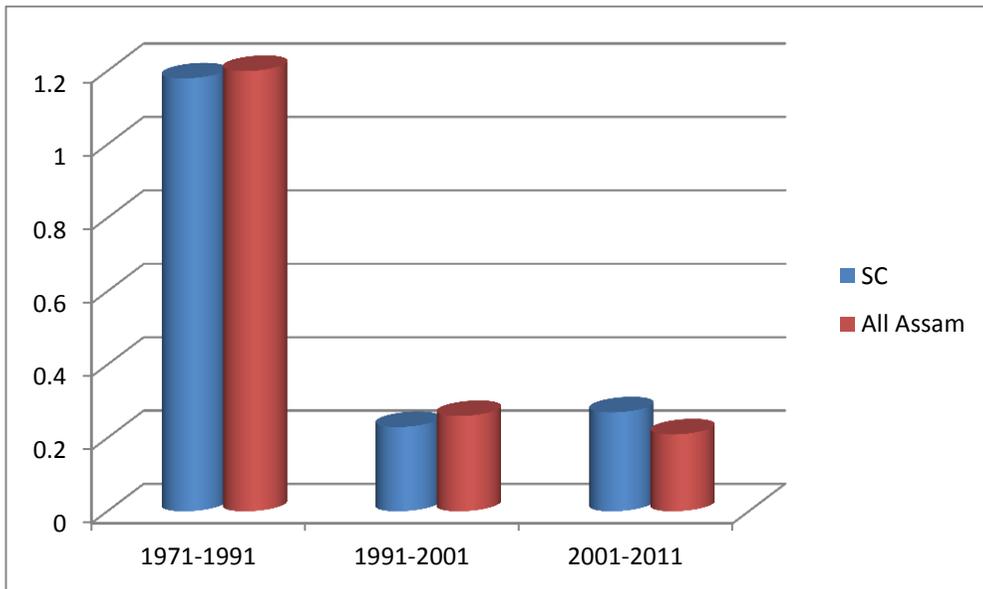
Figure 3.4.2 Decadal Improvement Rate of Female Literacy among SCs in Assam

3.2.5 Work Force Participation Rate: Work force participation rate is defined as the percentage of total workers (main and marginal) to the total population in an area. The trend in work force participation rate among the SC population in Assam has been discussed using Census data over the last three decades.

Table 3.4 Work Force Participation Rate among SC population in Assam

| Year	Person	Male	Female
1991	50	74.46	25.24
2001	34.4 (-15.6)	50.3 (-24.26)	17.3 (-7.94)
2011	50 (15.6)	74.78 (24.48)	25.22 (7.92)

Source: Census of India

Figures ( ) are increases/decreases from the previous Census in % point

From the Table-3.4 it can be observed that there was a marked declined in the work force participation rate among SC population along with males and females over the period 1991 to 2001. For male, there was a 24.46 percentage points decline in the work force participation rate, while it was 7.94 percentage points for female population over the period 1991 to 2001.

But there has been a sharper increase in the work force participation rate over the period 2001 to 2011. During this period, there has been a 15.6 percentage points increase in overall work force participation rate among SCs in Assam. For males, the increasing rate was 24.48 percentage points and for females, it was 7.92 percentage points. The work force participation rate among SCs in Assam has been presented in figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5 Work Force Participation Rate among SCs in Assam
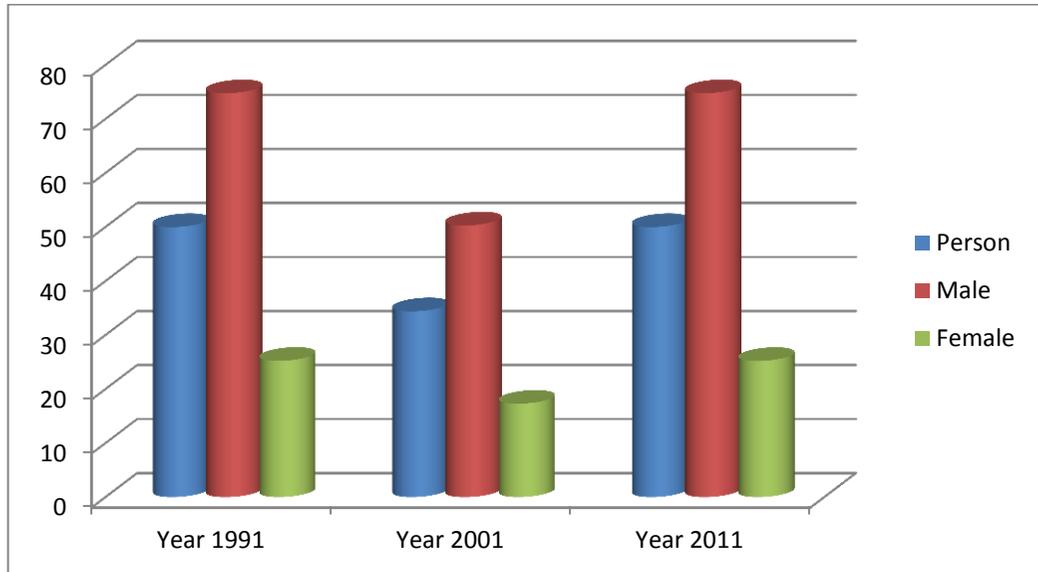
Conclusion: The development indicators are the important reflectors of advancement of any society. In the previous section, we have examined the development attainment of different communities in Assam with a special focus on the SC community over the last four decades. This concluding is meant for summarising broad conclusion derived from the present study. Our analysis of rural-urban composition shows that there is a growing trend for a gradual shift of population from rural to urban areas. Again, convergence occurring in the sex ratios of the SCs with the state average. But we find divergence in case of SCs in health achievement. However, there has been a sharp increase in the civic amenities in case of SCs than that of STs as well as state average. Again, in regard to literacy, we find convergence, thereby implying social inclusion. The work force participation rate among the SCs shows that despite a sharper increase in the work force participation rate, about fifty percent of them remain idle for at least six months of a year. Again, occupationally, SCs are traditionally backward. The analysis of poverty shows that ST poverty is declining faster than state average in rural areas, but ST poverty is falling at a faster rate in the urban areas. Thus, the findings of the present study show that the performance of the SC community on human development front is almost satisfactory. The analysis of the various development indicators show that the SC community is gradually catching up with the state average --- suggesting that this community is starting to share the benefits of the process of human development.

No doubt, a positive change on various socio-economic parameters has been recorded but, the gap between the mainstream and the Scheduled Caste population still persists in the state. Historical exclusion of this community from access to economic, educational, civil and cultural rights is responsible for its socio-economic backwardness. The act of continuing atrocities and violence against the SC community made by the so called mainstream population exclude the community from enjoying its economic, social and

political freedom. Therefore, it is essential to reorient and focus on the strategies favourable to them to support this lesser privileged section of the society and bring this downtrodden to the national mainstream.

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