

EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN FOUR EASTERN STATES OF INDIA

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Abstract

Scheduled Caste people were the most depressed class in Indian society. They were called untouchables or outcastes. Women's position was further depressed. In this article scheduled caste women's position was compared with scheduled caste males' and general caste women's position. Comparison was done for four eastern states of India over a thirty year period. The states were chosen as Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal and the period taken under consideration was from 1991 through 2011.

Keywords: Scheduled caste girls and women: Education:Oppression:

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1. Introduction

In India scheduled caste people are systematically discriminated on the basis of work and descent for centuries. Over two hundred million people belong to scheduled caste in India. As per 2011 census of India Scheduled Caste (SC) comprise of 16.6 per cent of India's population. They are also known as untouchables or outcastes. They experience violence, discrimination and social exclusion on regular basis.

The all India percentage of literacy among SCs as per 2011 census is 66.1per cent ,while the female literacy constitutes 56.50 per cent .SC women labour force form the backbone of Indian agriculture. And a large number of SC women are employed as unorganized labour in the urban areas. Increasing faminisation of labour and poverty are highest among the scheduled castes.

2. Historical Background

The **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. The terms are recognised in the Constitution of India and the groups are designated in one or other of the categories. For much of the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent, they were known as the Depressed Classes. In 1950 and 1951 art 341and art.342 of the constitution of India defined the terms scheduled caste and scheduled tribe for states and union territories.

In India women are not treated at par with men. Moreover scheduled caste women are oppressed among the oppressed. They have their own share of universal suffering as women. In addition to that, they are victims of a variety of exploitation-social, religious, economic, cultural etc. Their experience of patriarchal domination is more severe than that of higher caste women. In a patriarchal society like India SC women are controlled by their husbands and other male folk. Even after 72 years of independence and constitutional guarantees, SC women have to undergo several travails. They have to work hard for earning livelihood of her family. SC women in general, have to make a two-way struggle ,one in home and other outside the home.

In India, the traditional four-fold caste system, called 'Varna', consists of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, all of whom are considered twice born and are allowed to read holy

scriptures. The Fourth group the Sudras –the servile caste is not allowed to read the holy texts. SCs are even lower castes . The so-called 'outcaste' or 'untouchable' groups, whose very shadow was considered polluting to caste Hindus. They cannot draw water from the wells and tanks used by the caste Hindus. They are exploited sexually by upper caste men and as domestic hands by the upper caste women. They are doubly exploited by the men and women of caste Hindus. SC women face triple burden of class, caste and gender. The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including Manusmriti, Atharva Veda, Vishnu Smriti and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmins led to an unequal Society.

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (2000), approximately 75 per cent of the SC girls drop out of primary school despite reservation for SCs. Reasons for this early drop –out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society and even their teachers. Atrocities on SC women are recorded in newspaper, journals, govt. reports etc. The majority of the stories are of bright young SC girls who are punished by upper caste teachers in rural areas of India for daring to score good grades. Being rejected most girls drop-out of school and join for manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs .As a result we find lowest literacy rate for SC girls compared to the total population of the educated upper caste girls. Since only a small percentage of the total population of SC women is educated, the fate of the majority is very grim. According to Ministry of labour, Govt, of India, majority of SC women have the most formidable occupations and work as agricultural labourers, scavengers, sweepers and disposers of human waste. Majority of them are landless and bound to accept ridiculously low wages. If they protest it results in open violence, humiliation, beatings, rape and jail. There are also number of cases where the houses of SC women have been burnt down. The way out is education. Through education more SC women can know their basic human rights and they can raise their voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes.

3. Major areas of discrimination against SC women

1.Malnutrition: India has exceptionally high rate of child malnutrition because traditionally women eat last and least throughout their lives even when pregnant and sick. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children.

2.Poor Health: Women receives less health care than men. Many women die at the time of child birth in villages and remote areas for the lack of proper medical facilities. Working conditions and environmental pollution impair their health.

3.Lack of education: Illiteracy is rampant among the SC women specially in rural areas. Families categorically discriminate female child against male child. They give priority to male child with good food, clothing and schooling etc.

4.Overwork: Women work for more hours than men. They have to attend domestic duties and work outside to eke out their livelihood. They work more than men. Yet their work is not recognized and mostly underpaid, if not unpaid. Most of the SC women are agricultural workers. Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on these women.

5.Unskilled: Most of them are unskilled .because of lack of education and skills many SC women take up low paid jobs.

6.Mistreatment: In recent decades there has been alarming rise in crimes and atrocities on SC women.

7.Decision-making:SC women are being married off according to their family wishes. They have no control regarding child-bearing. Although they may contribute major share of their family income they are not allowed to participate in the decision making at any stage of life .

‘I pray to you with folded hands that you give me blessing I am going to do divine work. I want your blessings’. The person who was making this request was Savithribai Phule, Mahatma’s Phule’s wife and she was praying before the Brahmins of Pune who were pelting stones at her and throwing cowdung at her cursing her all the time.(Rawat 1977)

This situation exists in India even today despite constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination on the basis of caste and gender (Art.15(1)), the right to life and security of life (Art.21) and the constitutional directive to protect SCs from social injustice and all forms of

exploitation (Art.46). Moreover the Indian state has enacted a series of laws protecting the rights of SCs and women acknowledging the prevalence of discrimination and violence against these sections. A key law in this regard is the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act,1989. Mere enactment without implementation is of no use. Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for SC women; extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experiences by SC women. They are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. Sexual assault and rape of SC women and girls also occur within their own communities. The Devdashi system of temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. SC girl children are forced into prostitution. They are unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by the opponents.

Female infanticide is more prevalent among the uneducated SC families. Educational development among SC women is very marginal because most of the girls are not sent to schools because of the responsibilities at home. Gender discrimination starts at very early stage of their life. Girl children are retained at home to look after the siblings. Marriage at early age is also another reason for poor educational qualification. The occupation of SC women can be divided into the following categories- agricultural labourers, marginal cultivators, fisher women, traditional artisans, leather workers, weavers, scavengers and sweepers, midwifery. They also work in beedi factories and other unorganized sectors. Their working condition is very poor and remuneration is extremely low.

4. Comparative study of four eastern states of India

Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal are selected for comparative study of the educational status of SC girls and women.

Assam : Assam is one of the more economically backward state of India. More than two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas(NSS 64TH Round).Among the social groups SCs account for 9.25 per cent. According to 2011 census Assam has a better sex-ratio of 954 females per thousand males, which is higher than the all India sex –ratio(940 females per thousand males).

For education indicator Assam's performance is better than other eastern states. It is due to the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, and the participation of village communities through Village Education Communities(VECs).(HDR2011)

Bihar: Bihar is one of fastest growing state of India. However there is a high inter-state disparity with North Bihar lagging behind. North Behar is predominantly agrarian and is highly prone to floods with poor irrigation

and that of SCs (61.5per cent) are below state average. (NSS 64th Round).

West Bengal: It is most populous facilities and hence low agricultural productivity. Southern Bihar growing at a faster pace ,accounted for the larger proportion of SC population of the state. Samekit Karya Yojana has been incorporated in the seven tribal and backward districts –Arwal, Aurangbad, Jehanabad, Gaya, Jamui, Nawada and Rohtas. All of them are in Southern Bihar. Therefore, not only pace of growth has increased, it has also become more inclusive in nature (Economic survey of Bihar 2010-11). Scheduled Castes constitute more than one fifth of Bihar's population and it ranks third among all states in terms of the size of the SC population. SCs account for 22.22per cent in Bihar and share of the state is 11.74per cent at all India level. (NSS64th Round). The literacy rate at Bihar is 63.8 per cent as compared to 74per cent literacy rate of the country. (Census2011)

Orissa: Orissa is one of the economically poorer states of India. However it has some locational advantages. It is a coastal area. It has abundant natural resources-a fifth of India's coal, a quarter of its iron ore, a third of its bauxite reserves and most of the chromite. However geographical barrier like mountain (the Eastern Ghats), poor infrastructure and indifferent economic governance have hindered its growth and prosperity. Within the state SCs account for 18.9 per cent. Literacy rate of the state (68.3 per cent) is below national average and historically most industrialised states of the country. In the recent decades the state suffered de-industrialisations. However it has performed well in the service sector. West Bengal has been home to one of the largest proportion of SCs(9.2per cent of total population of India). SCs account for 29.2 per cent within the state. These groups have also been observed to be the poorest (West Bengal Human Development Report 2004). West Bengal is situated in the extreme east stretching from

Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. It is bordered by Bangladesh on its east. Apart from Bangladesh West Bengal get migrants from Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh settling mainly at Gangetic plane. However the state's performance in terms of literacy was better than the national average. According to census 2011 the literacy rate of West Bengal was 77per cent as compared to national literacy rate 74per cent. The state govt. prioritised the opening of new colleges in rural areas. This catered to the SCs and STs who reside in the rural areas. With access to higher education they performed better than the national average for their groups. The other reason for the better performance of the state as compared to the all India average was that the per capita real expenditure on general education more than doubled during the period 1980-81 to 1997-98. The state govt. has introduced an alternate school education system (Sishu Siksha Karmashuchi) with the objective of providing basic education to children aged 5-9 years who were unable to get enrolled in formal primary schools.

Illiteracy of SC male and female across four eastern states

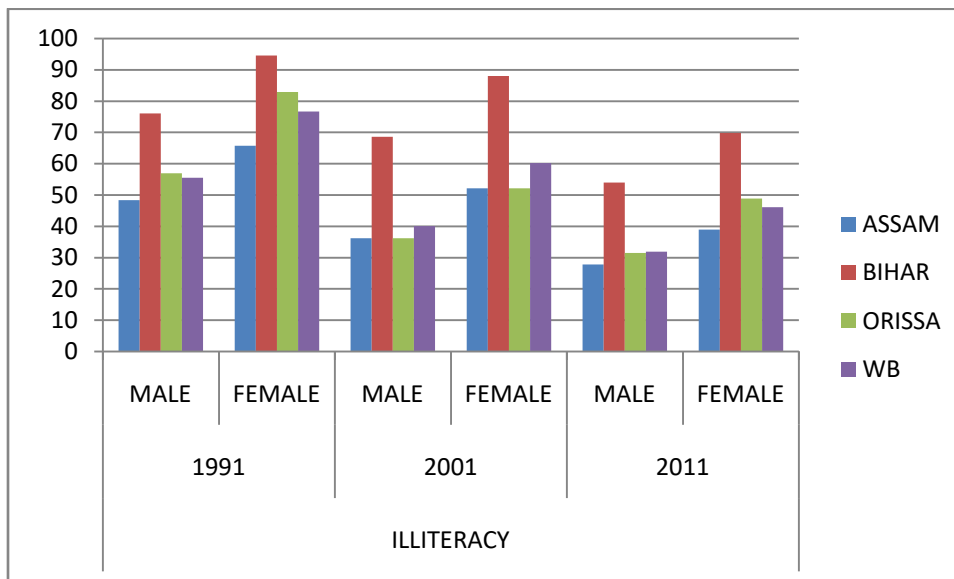


Fig 1

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

From Fig-1 it is evident that illiteracy is highest among the SC women of Bihar although it is declining over time. For all the states female illiteracy is higher than male. Assam has the lowest illiteracy among the four states and it has a declining trend over time. In Orissa female illiteracy for SC declined sharply from 1991 to 2001. But it is higher than Assam and West Bengal in

2011. Female illiteracy in West Bengal declined from 1991 through 2011. West Bengal's position is much better than Bihar and Orissa but worse than Assam.

Primary Education from 1991 through 2011 for four Eastern States of India

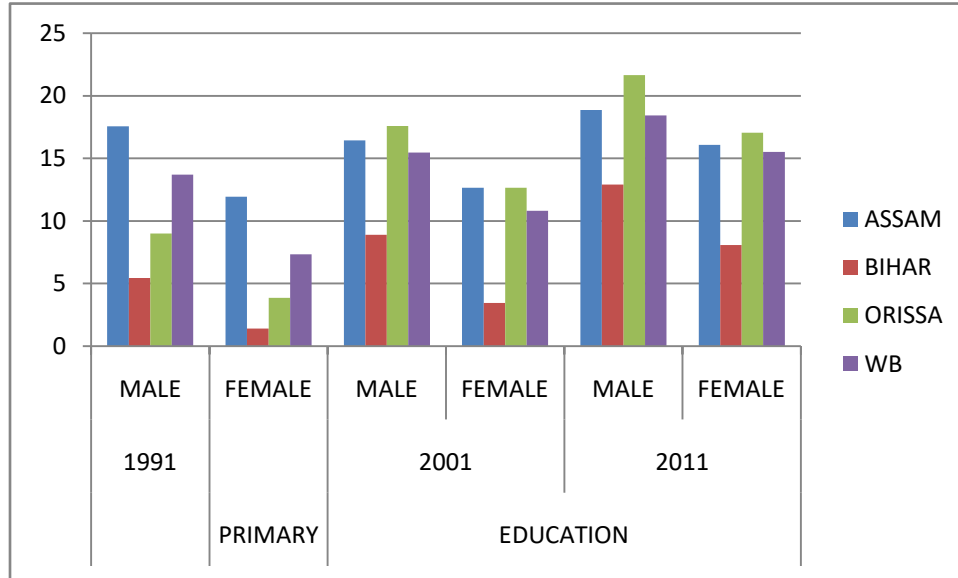


Fig – 2

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

Progress in Primary education is quite admirable in Orissa for SC female from 1991 to 2011. Next best is Assam and West Bengal. Bihar is in the last position although it has an increasing trend over the years for sc female and male primary education. For all the states female achievement in primary education is lower than male.

Secondary Education for SC male and female for Four Eastern States of India

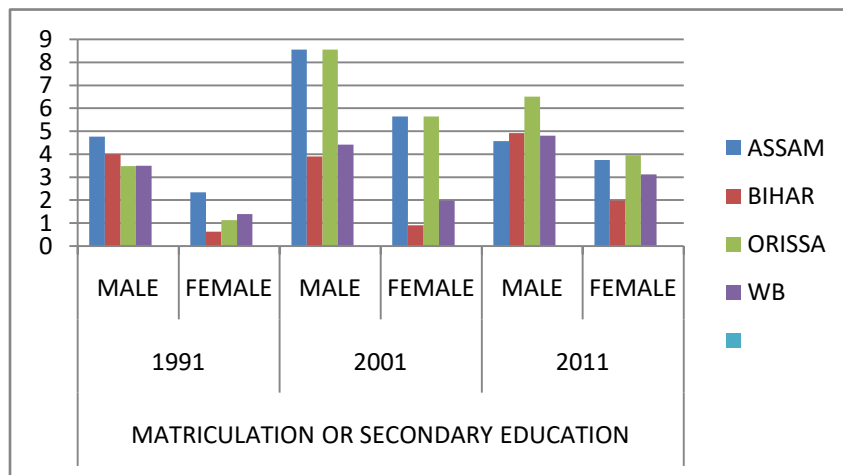


Fig-3

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

In case of secondary education Orissa has the highest achievement for SC female. Bihar has the least achievement. Assam and West Bengal are in between the two. More or less there is increasing trend for SC female secondary education in all the four states from 1991 through 2011.

Higher Secondary Education of SC male and female for the four eastern states

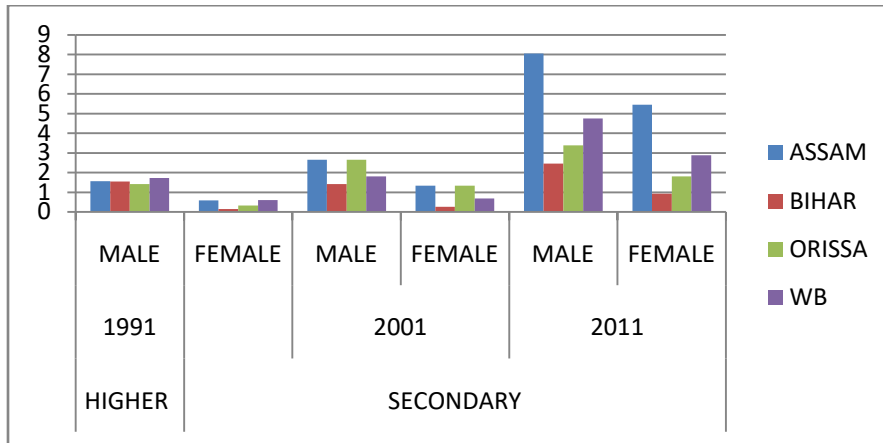


Fig - 4

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

There is drastic change in the achievement of H.S education for Assam from 2001 to 2011. Achievements for other three states are far below. All the four states have increasing trend for H.S education for male and female. But female achievement is much lower than their male counterpart.

Graduate and Above ;SC male and female for four eastern states

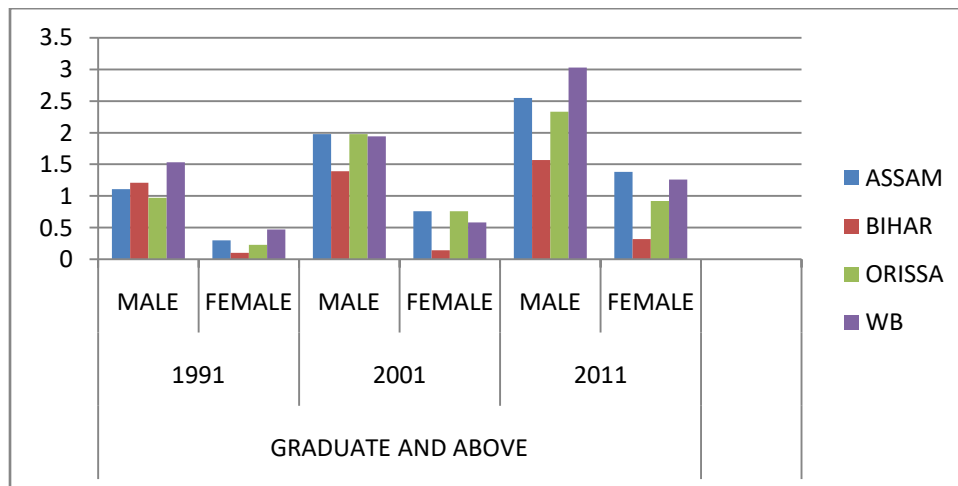


Fig – 5

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

For 'Graduate and Above' Assam is at the first place both for male and female but there is huge gap between male and female. Next is West Bengal. Thereafter Orissa and the last is Bihar. There is moderate increase from 1991 -2001 phase and the rate of increase accelerated for the period 2001 - 2011.

Comparing status of education of SC category and the general category women we come across shocking results. In fig-6 if we compare illiteracy for general category and SC women for all the four states we find there is huge gap between the two. It is more pronounced for Bihar. Over time there is declining tendency for all the states. Story is almost same either for primary education (Fig-7) or secondary (fig-8). It only shows the deprivation for SC category women and girls. So far as graduation and above is concerned for Assam, Bihar and Orissa achievement of SC women is less than 1 per cent. For West Bengal it is slightly above 1 percentage point even in the last census (COI2011).

Illiteracy for general category and SC girls and women from 1991 to 2011

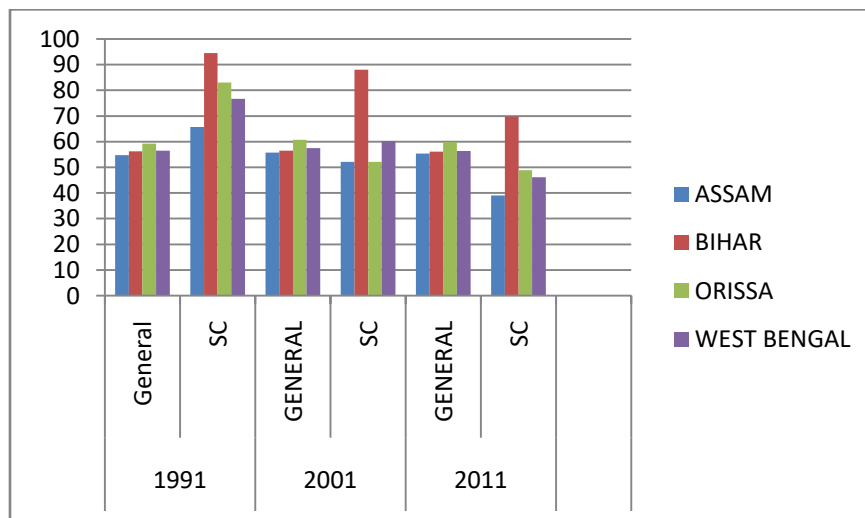


Fig-6

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

Primary Education for General and SC category (female only) for four states

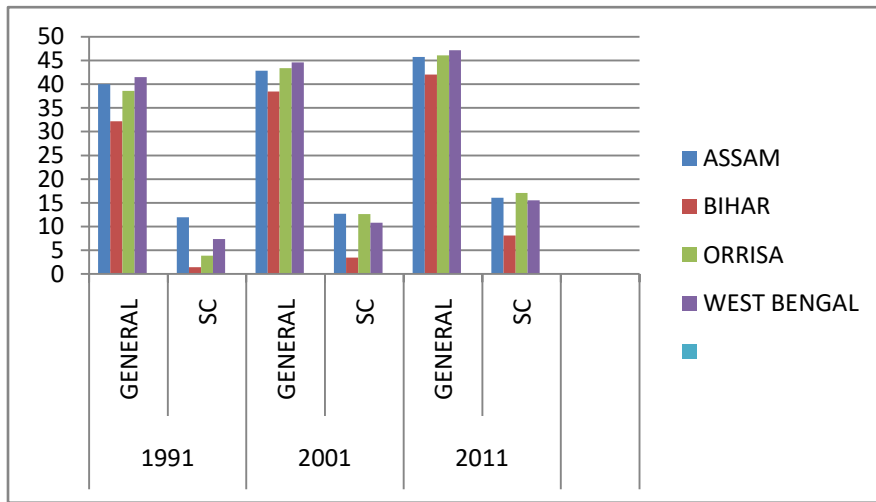


Fig-7

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

Secondary Education for General and SC category (female only) for four states

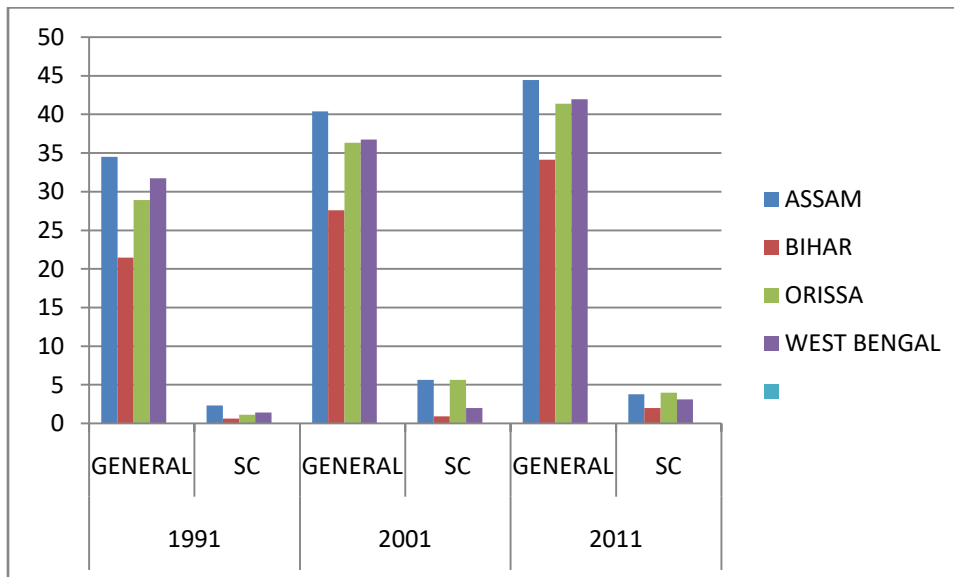


Fig-8

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

Graduation and above for General and SC Women for the four states

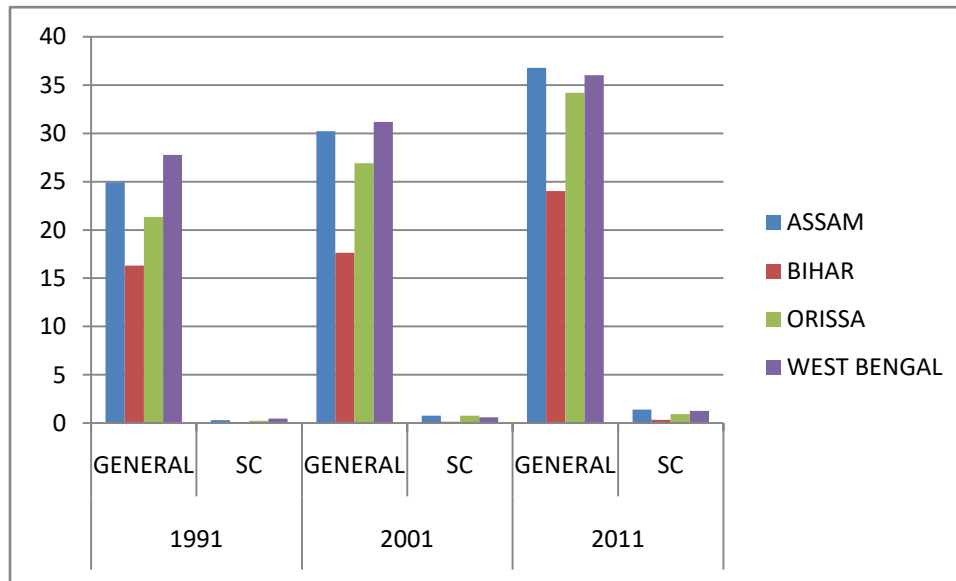


Fig-9

Source: Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011

5. Conclusion

SC women are compared both ways- with cross section datas and time-series datas. We have compared SC females with SC males which states the story of deprivation within their own community. And the other comparison is between SC girls and women with the general caste women and girls. The deprivation is more pronounced in the latter case. But there is variation from one state to another. There should be attitudinal change of the general caste towards the scheduled caste and State Government has to play active part for educating SC girls and women so that they can fight against the oppression they are facing in their day-to-day life.

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