



OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SCHEDULED CASTES POPULATION IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY, ASSAM: A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Scheduled castes population constitute a sizable portion of the total population of Assam accounting for 6.16 percent according to 2001 census. They generally live in a abject poverty in the rural areas and are mostly landless people. In the urban areas also most of them live in the unhygienic slum areas. Thus they are considered to be socio-economically weaker section of the society. Occupation is a very significant social attribute of population. It exerts vital influence on social, economic demographic and cultural characteristics. Most of the scheduled castes people by and large non agricultural professional people, especially engaged in fishing , gold smithy, carpentry, cloth washing, pottery making, sweeping, leather tanning etc. Lack of rigid social segregation in the Brahmaputra valley, Assam present a settlement pattern of the scheduled castes, which is different from that in other parts of India. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the Occupational structure and their spatial distribution of the scheduled castes population in the socio- economic context.

Introduction

The population of the Brahmaputra valley, Assam is constituted by various ethnic groups with diverse socio-cultural attributes. There are four main castes in Hindu society. These are the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. The sudras have suffered from various socio-economic and political disabilities in society. Some of them were called “Untouchables” and referred to as depressed classes till 1935. According to the sixth scheduled of the Indian constitution scheduled castes population of India is regarded as weaker section of the Indian society. It may be noted here that, the president of India by public notification under Article 341(1) of the constitution of India listed and declared them socio-economically backward people in our country. The vast majority of the members of the scheduled castes are engaged in certain unclean or menial hereditary occupation which the higher castes people consider socially degrading. Consequently, they have remained at the bottom of the castes hierarchy and usually at a very low economic level.

The proportion of the scheduled castes population in the study area has 6.16 percent in 2001 census. There are as many as 16 scheduled castes groups in the Brahmaputra valley, according to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes modification order 1956(1). It is observed that out of the sixteen castes only seven are indigenous to the valley, the seven other groups who are purely of immigrant origin came especially from East Bengal and Bihar during the pre Independence period and two castes groups are partly indigenous and partly immigrant origin. Most of the scheduled castes people in the rural areas are by and large non agricultural professional people especially engaged in fishing, gold smithy, carpentry cloth washing, pottery making, sweeping, leather tanning etc. In addition to these traditional occupations, a section of them are also engaged in agricultural and its allied activities. The occupational structure of scheduled caste work –force in the Brahmaputra valley at present fall into following occupational categories.

1. Fishing.
2. Small peasant and Landless agricultural Labourers.
3. Artisans or Small commodity producers like Gold Smithy, Carpentry etc.
4. Services particularly Cloth Washing, Sweeping, Cleaning etc.
5. Industrial workers mainly in the industries related with their traditional crafts like leather- tanning, Shoe-making, pottery-making bamboo works etc.

The two third of the working population of the scheduled castes are engaged in primary sector and small section of the work-force is engaged in secondary and tertiary sector of economy. This is due to low level of performance in the education. However, about one fourth of them are found to be engaged in petty business and small industries.

Data Base and Methodology

The present study entirely depend on secondary data, which are taken from the different census of India, volumes and other relevant government publication of Directorate of economics and Statistics for the period of 1991 to 2001. Methods adopted in the present analysis are simple percentage, measures of central tendency, dispersion and correlation.

Study Area

The Brahmaputra valley lies between 25°45' N and 27°56' N Latitudes and 89° 42' E and 96° 0' E Longitude. The valley is a distinct physiographic unit of the north eastern region of India. The study areas lie within the present state of Assam and consist of eighteen (18) districts in 2001 and (21) twenty one districts in 2011. The valley is an alluvial plain covering an area of 56194 sq.km representing 72% of total area of Assam.

Occupational Structure

Occupation is a very significant socio-economic attributes of population. It exerts significant influence on social,

cultural and economic characteristics of any region. It refers to profession or any type of work, one is engaged in. Besides physical resource base and advancement of science and technology, status of scheduled castes in the society and their historical background are the most important influencing factors in case of occupational pattern of scheduled castes. The census of India classified the total population of any area into two broad groups viz, Workers and Non workers.

Work Participation among Scheduled Castes

Work participation rate denotes the percentage of total workers i.e., total main and marginal workers to the total population in an area. According to 2001 census the total work participation rate of the Scheduled castes population in the Brahmaputra valley is 34.88 percent, of which male participation rate is 50.38 percent and female is 18.34 percent. It indicates that the proportion of Scheduled castes male workers is comparatively higher than the proportion of Scheduled castes female workers indicating a low economic status of women in their society. The females are generally engaged in household domestic works or other unorganized sector of economy and therefore, they are not included in the working population by the census of India.

TABLE 1
Brahmaputra Valley
Work participation rates of the Scheduled castes, 2001 (in percentage).

| DISTRICTS | WORK PARTICIPATION RATE | | | Sex disparity |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------|--------|---------------|
| | Person | Male | Female | |
| 1.KOKRAJHAR | 33.28 | 50.80 | 14.08 | 0.80 |
| 2.DHUBRI | 30.95 | 51.03 | 9.38 | 1.00 |
| 3.GOALPARA | 33.41 | 49.84 | 16.36 | 0.71 |
| 4.BONGAIGOAN | 30.80 | 48.87 | 11.26 | 0.88 |
| 5.BARPETA | 31.08 | 48.78 | 12.00 | 0.84 |
| 6.KAMRUP | 32.04 | 48.38 | 14.59 | 0.74 |
| 7.NALBARI | 31.85 | 48.50 | 14.29 | 0.75 |
| 8.DARRANG | 33.21 | 50.61 | 14.60 | 0.78 |
| 9.MARIGAON | 37.78 | 52.89 | 21.60 | 0.61 |
| 10.NAGAON | 33.66 | 50.88 | 15.43 | 0.75 |
| 11.SONITPUR | 34.58 | 50.12 | 17.97 | 0.66 |
| 12.LAKHIMPUR | 54.83 | 60.82 | 48.60 | 0.22 |
| 13.DHEMAJI | 39.96 | 47.36 | 31.93 | 0.28 |
| 14.TINSUKIA | 32.77 | 49.27 | 14.14 | 0.77 |
| 15.DIBRUGARH | 34.15 | 47.59 | 19.46 | 0.57 |
| 16.SIBSAGAR | 33.89 | 48.43 | 18.75 | 0.63 |
| 17.JORHAT | 39.36 | 50.77 | 27.26 | 0.44 |
| 18.GOLAGHAT | 38.46 | 50.18 | 26.08 | 0.46 |
| BRAHM.VALLEY | 34.88 | 50.38 | 18.34 | 0.66 |

Source : Calculated from data of census of India Assam 2001

Sex disparity is calculated using Sopher's Disparity Index.

The spatial variation of work participation in the Brahmaputra valley shows a very uneven pattern across the area. The participation rate is found to be as low as 30.80 percent in Bongaigaon district and as high as 54.83 percent in Lakhimpur district of the valley. On the other hand male participation varies between 47.36 percent in Dhemaji district and 60.82 percent in Lakhimpur district of the Brahmaputra valley, while the female participation in the valley varies from 9.38 percent in Dhubri district (lowest) to 48.60 percent (highest) in Lakhimpur district of the Brahmaputra valley. It indicates the high degree of spatial disparity among the females when compared with the male work participation rate.

TABLE 2
Summary of male/female work participation among the scheduled castes in the Brahmaputra valley, 2001.

| Male/female work participation | Total /rural /urban | Highest | Lowest | Mean (X) | Standard deviation (S.D.) | Co-efficient of variation (C.V.) | Level of spatial disparity |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Male work participation | Total | 60.82 (Lakhimpur) | 47.36 (Dhemaji) | 50.28 | 2.89 | 5.75 | Low |
| | Rural | 61.30 (Lakhimpur) | 47.03 (Dhemaji) | 50.18 | 3.05 | 6.07 | Low |
| | Urban | 53.56 (Sonitpur) | 47.37 (Nalbari) | 50.38 | 1.76 | 3.49 | Low |
| Female works participation | Total | 48.60 (Lakhimpur) | 9.38 (Dhubri) | 19.32 | 9.12 | 47.20 | High |
| | Rural | 50.19 (Lakhimpur) | 9.29 (Dhubri) | 20.80 | 9.44 | 45.38 | High |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|-------|----------------------|----------------------|------|------|-------|----------|
| | Urban | 16.13 (Lakhimpur) | 6.03 (Kokrajhar) | 9.07 | 2.32 | 25.58 | Moderate |
| Sex disparity in work participatio n | Total | 1.100 (Dhubri) | 0.22 (Lakhimpur) | 0.66 | 0.19 | 28.78 | moderate |
| | Rural | 1.01 (Dhubri) | 0.196 (Lakhimpur) | 0.61 | 0.20 | 33.06 | High |
| | Urban | 1.241 (Kokrajhar) | 0.739 (Lakhimpur) | 1.01 | 0.11 | 11.74 | Low |

Source : Calculated from data of census of India part II B (i) Vol. I & II Primary Census abstract

Co-efficient of variation 0 - 15 - Low

15 - 30- Moderate

30 and above - High

In the table2 the spatial variation of male participation in rural areas is significantly high recording the co-efficient of variation 6.07, while in the urban areas it is comparatively low with C.V. 3.49 . In case of female work participation pattern a very high variation is observed in the rural areas (C.V. =45.38) percent and in the urban areas it is moderate with (C.V. 25.58).

When total population is concerned the sex disparity in work participation is found to be comparatively higher in the rural areas than the urban areas. Spatial variation also further shows that it is more in rural than the urban areas. The cause of significant variation of rural urban and male female work participation can be attributed to the availability of infrastructural facilities coupled with prevailing social system and status of women in the backward rural society. The low rate of female work participation both in rural and urban areas is due mainly to the low female literacy rate and low educational attainment level which resulted in the low percentage of employment in services. Moreover, some scheduled castes groups are non-agricultural and landless people and therefore, there is little scope to engage them in agriculture. In addition to this, the females in most of the households are not allowed to take part in fish trade or some traditional works like shoe-making , leather tanning, gold smithy, gardening etc. which also resulting low female work participation rates. The rural urban work participation of scheduled castes population in different districts of the Brahmaputra valley presents a different pattern. It is mentioned earlier that the work participation rate among the scheduled castes workers vary from rural to urban areas in the valley.

TABLE 3(a)

Brahmaputra Valley

Rural urban work participation rates of scheduled castes people,2001 (Figure in percentage)

| WORK PERTICIPATION RATE RURAL | | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|---------------|
| DISTRICT | PERSON | MALE | FEMALE | SEX DISPARITY |
| 1.KOKRAJHAR | 34.13 | 50.22 | 16.42 | 0.711 |
| 2.DHUBRI | 31.23 | 51.59 | 9.29 | 1.017 |
| 3.GOALPARA | 34.22 | 49.89 | 17.84 | 0.661 |
| 4.BONGAIGOAN | 31.16 | 48.90 | 11.94 | 0.849 |
| 5.BARPETA | 31.34 | 48.60 | 12.61 | 0.816 |
| 6.KAMRUP | 32.14 | 47.97 | 15.31 | 0.708 |
| 7.NALBARI | 32.02 | 48.55 | 14.58 | 0.743 |
| 8.DARRANG | 33.38 | 50.23 | 15.41 | 0.744 |
| 9.MARIGAON | 37.78 | 52.89 | 21.60 | 0.610 |
| 10.NAGAON | 34.16 | 50.84 | 16.54 | 0.718 |
| 11.SONITPUR | 34.84 | 49.61 | 19.12 | 0.620 |
| 12.LAKHIMPUR | 55.85 | 61.30 | 50.19 | 0.196 |
| 13.DHEMAJI | 40.59 | 47.03 | 33.64 | 0.243 |
| 14.TINSUKIA | 34.11 | 48.66 | 17.83 | 0.640 |
| 15.DIBRUGARH | 36.06 | 47.63 | 23.54 | 0.470 |
| 16.SIBSAGAR | 34.97 | 48.46 | 20.93 | 0.550 |
| 17.JORHAT | 40.77 | 50.77 | 30.20 | 0.377 |
| 18.GOLAGHAT | 39.07 | 50.16 | 27.45 | 0.425 |
| BRAHM.VALLEY | 35.70 | 50.43 | 20.03 | 0.609 |

Source : Calculated from data, census of India , Assam , 2001

TABLE 3(b)
Brahmaputra Valley

Urban work participation rates of scheduled castes people,2001 (Figure in percentage)

| WORK PERTICIPATION RATE | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------|-------|--------|---------------|
| URBAN | | | | |
| DISTRICT | PERSON | MALE | FEMALE | SEX DISPARITY |
| 1.KOKRAJHAR | 30.36 | 52.83 | 6.03 | 1.2418 |
| 2.DHUBRI | 30.64 | 50.40 | 9.47 | 0.9873 |
| 3.GOALPARA | 29.80 | 49.60 | 9.83 | 0.9555 |
| 4.BONGAIGOAN | 28.64 | 48.71 | 7.12 | 1.093 |
| 5.BARPETA | 29.97 | 49.58 | 9.39 | 0.9772 |
| 6.KAMRUP | 31.83 | 49.30 | 12.98 | 0.8141 |
| 7.NALBARI | 27.95 | 47.37 | 7.77 | 1.0287 |
| 8.DARRANG | 31.98 | 53.30 | 8.72 | 1.0772 |
| 9.MARIGAON | 30.10 | 50.14 | 8.20 | 1.0514 |
| 10.NAGAON | 30.13 | 51.20 | 7.40 | 1.1182 |
| 11.SONITPUR | 32.79 | 53.56 | 9.96 | 1.0181 |
| 12.LAKHIMPUR | 34.45 | 51.35 | 16.13 | 0.7394 |
| 13.DHEMAJI | 30.88 | 51.98 | 6.26 | 1.2097 |
| 14.TINSUKIA | 30.33 | 50.38 | 7.37 | 1.10588 |
| 15.DIBRUGARH | 29.76 | 47.49 | 9.89 | 0.9159 |
| 16.SIBSAGAR | 29.07 | 48.28 | 9.03 | 0.9733 |
| 17.JORHAT | 30.77 | 50.82 | 9.13 | 1.0121 |
| 18.GOLAGHAT | 31.05 | 50.50 | 8.57 | 1.0367 |
| BRAHM.VALLEY | 30.71 | 50.14 | 9.70 | 0.9713 |

Source : Calculated from data, census of India , Assam s-19, 2008

The work participation in the urban areas the majority of districts in the upper Brahmaputra valley have recorded higher values than that of the lower Brahmaputra valley. It is mentioned earlier that both in rural and urban areas the economic opportunities for illiterate socio-economically backward scheduled castes people are limited. The upper Assam is comparatively more advanced where average literacy rate is high in the urban areas and therefore provide better scope for employment. Due to different economic base and the prevailing social norms the work participation rates of the scheduled castes differ at district level both in the rural and urban areas of the study area. It may be noted here that scheduled castes people by and large are non-agricultural professional people pursuing certain craft and occupation, traditionally vested on them by the society and giving little scope to engage female workers in some of the crafts and occupation like bamboo works, pottery making, shoe making, washing clothes, drum beating works in the cremation ground etc. while in some works like sweeping, cleaning etc. female workers are engaged with the males. In agricultural works also male workers are more in number than the female workers resulting uneven distribution of workers.

OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN

In the Brahmaputra valley 46.03 percent of the total scheduled castes population are enumerated as workers in primary sector, 12.06 percent as workers in the secondary sector and 41.01 percent as workers in the tertiary sector. The higher proportion of workers in the primary sector is primarily due to the fact that a major section of scheduled castes population is engaged in agriculture and fishing. During the last thirty years due to the conversion of majority of natural fishing grounds, like beels, ponds ,river etc. to commercial fishing grounds, the poor scheduled castes fishermen have to leave this occupation in some places. In the primary sectors the scheduled castes people are engaged mainly in fishing besides working as agricultural labourers and cultivators. Out of the total male workers 33.72 percent are male cultivator and 6.65 percent are agricultural labourer. It is, however, interesting to note that there is also a sizable proportion of female workers in the primary sector who work as agricultural labourers (9.29percent). It is due to poor economic condition of scheduled castes families coupled with very low educationl attainment level among the females. The proportion of workers in the secondary and tertiary sectors are though not very high, there are wide variations in the rural urban areas.

VARIATION OF OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN AMONG SCHEDULED CASTES GROUPS

It is mentioned above that fishing is the most important occupation of scheduled castes population in the Brahmaputra valley. This is however, common in case of Kaibartta, Namasudra, Jholo-malo, and Jalkeot groups. They generally reside along the banks of the rivers and beels and in the low lying areas.

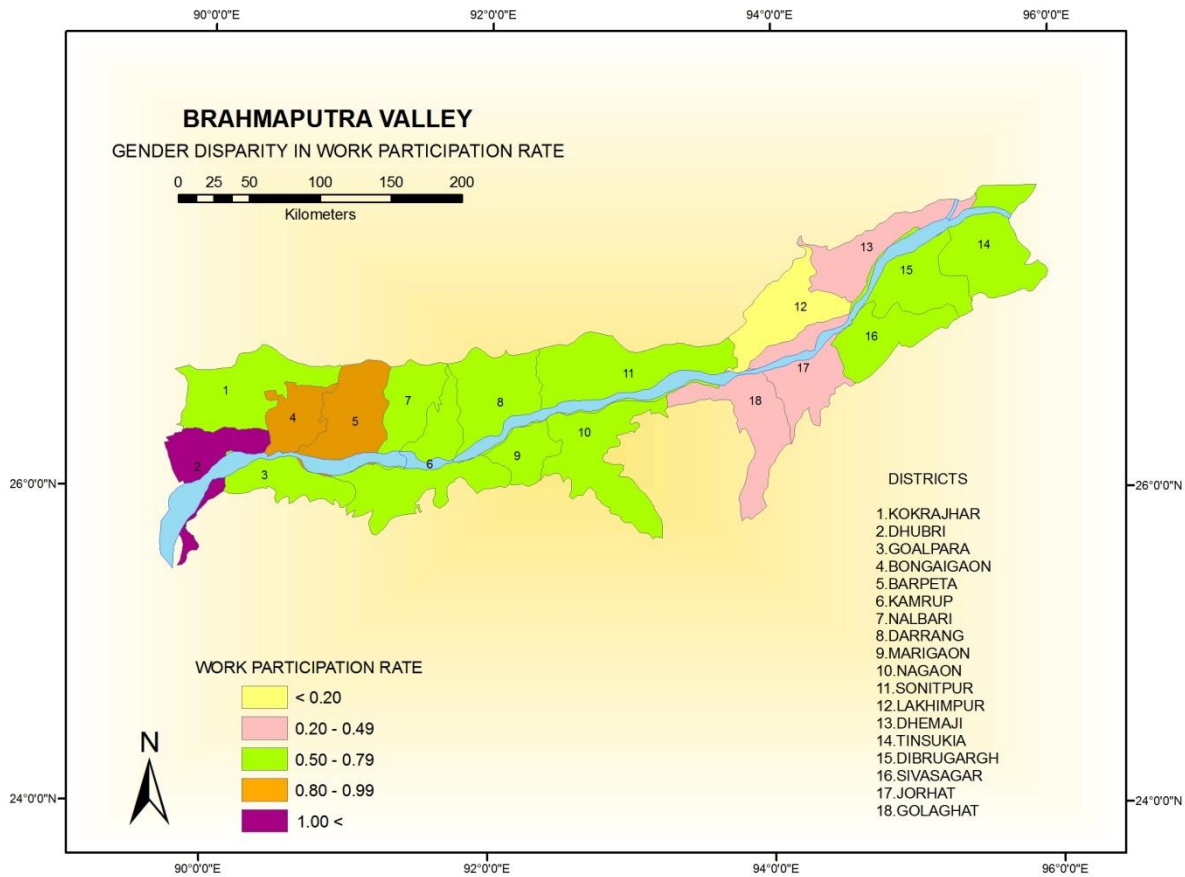
TABLE 4.

Origin, spatial distribution and traditional occupations of different scheduled castes groups in the Brahmaputra valley.

| SN o. | CASTES | ORIGIN | TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION | SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION |
|-------|----------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Bansphor | Immigrant from (North India) | Bamboo work and sweeping | Urban areas |
| 2. | Bhuinmali | Indigenous | Sweeping, gardening | Western Brahmaputra valley |
| 3. | Brittial Bania | Indigenous | Gold smithy, Trade and commerce | Whole of the Brahmaputra valley |
| 4. | Dhobi or Dhubi | Immigrant (from Bihar) | Cloth washing | Urban areas |
| 5 | Dugla Dholi | Both Indigenous and Immigrant (Bengal) | Drummers, music players | Western Brahmaputra valley |
| 6 | Hira | Indigenous | Pottery | Western and Middle Brahmaputra valley |
| 7 | Jalkeot | Indigenous | Fishing | Western Middle Brahmaputra valley |
| 8 | Jalo-Malo | Indigenous | Fishing | Middle-Western Brahmaputra valley |
| 9 | Kaibartta | Indigenous | Fishing | Whole of Brahmaputra valley especially Upper Brahmaputra valley |
| 10 | Lalbegi | Immigrant (From Bihar) | Scavenger / Sweeping / Cleaning | Urban areas |
| 11 | Mahara | Indigenous | Palki Bearing | Goalpara district |
| 12. | Mehtar Bhangi | Immigrant (From Bihar and Bengal) | Sweeping / Cleaning | Urban areas |
| 13. | Muchi/ Richi | Immigrant (From Bihar) | Leather work | Urban areas |
| 14. | Namasudra | Immigrant (From Bengal) | Fishing | Western Brahmaputra valley |
| 15. | Patni | Both indigenous and immigrant | Boating (Boatman) | Central Brahmaputra valley |
| 16. | Sutradhar | Immigrant | Lumbering and Carpentry | Western and Middle Brahmaputra valley |

The study of occupational pattern of different Scheduled castes groups reveals that there is variation in division of labour. The indigenous Kaibartta group is claiming the highest percentage of population engaged mainly in fishing and fish trade besides working as small agricultural workers. In addition to fishing now-a-days they are also engaged in different works under secondary and tertiary sectors of economy. Fishing and fish trade are also the main occupations of the Namasudra, Jalkeot and Jhalomalo people. The indigenous Bania people are gold smith by profession. Trade and commerce are their other occupations. Sweeping and gardening are the main occupations of Bhuinmali. Hiras are potters by profession. Though Maharas were palki bearers of Zaminders by profession in the past, presently they are engaged in petty trades. They specially found in Goalpara district of the western Brahmaputra Valley. Mehtar, an immigrant group from Bihar presently engaged in sweeping and scavenging. Bansphors are also engaged in sweeping and Bamboo works while Muchis are mainly shoe makers and Dhobis are washermen. Lalbegis are scavengers and sweepers. Bansphor, Muchi, Dhobi and Lalbegi people are immigrant from Bihar. Sutradhars mainly of Bengali speaking people

are carpenter caste. Patnis who originally are boatmen, now-a-days engaged in different works. Dholi-Dugla people are drummers and music players concentrated mainly in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley.



SEX DISPARITY IN WORK PARTICIPATION RATE :

There is a wide variation in respect of male female work participation rate in the Brahmaputra valley. The sex disparity in respect of work participation rate among the scheduled castes people also varies from district to district within the valley. The difference between male and female work participation rates is more in the urban areas than in the rural areas of the study area.. Among the districts the sex disparity in the rural areas is highest in Dhubri district (DIS=1.01) while in case of urban areas Kokrajhar district has recorded the highest disparity (DIS=1.241) which is very close to Dhemaji district (DIS=1.209). The comparatively higher sex disparity in urban areas is mainly due to immigrant scheduled castes females who are illiterate and they are under social restriction to participate in all works like male. Even they are not allowed to participate in some outside works except domestic work. The real structure would be clear when the occupational structure among both male and female is properly analyzed.

CONCLUSION

The work participation rate in the region as a whole is discouraging as more than three fifth of the total population is non workers. Since the Vedic period they have been engaged in some traditional profession like scavenging, cleaning, sweeping, fishing, pottery making, leather tanning etc. with increase in literacy among them ,though there has been socio-economic transformation in the Independent India, the progress is very slow. Thus majority of them have been engaged in their own traditional occupation even today .The indigenous people in the rural areas live along the bank of the rivers, beels and other water bodies as they are generally engaged in fishing and fish trade. Significant gender disparity also exists in work participation rate. The non recognition of the contribution made by female in wide ranging activities in unorganized sectors of economy including domestic work resulted in the low percentage of female workers. The analysis also showed that in both rural and urban areas occupational divergence was developed. Occupational convergence was most evident in non household industries.

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