Caste and discrimination in higher education: Evidence from the National Sample Surveys

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The issue of reservations in higher education has always been a highly emotive one, especially in India where it has been politically and socially fraught in recent times in particular. It is also one that has direct implications not only for public policy but also for the administration and functioning of academic institutions and of course the fate of large numbers of students. Given all this, it is remarkable that, with a few important exceptions[2], the discussions and debates around this theme have been largely theoretical rather than empirically based. Even when they have sought to include some empirical content, these have typically been based on the results of micro studies and have rarely relied upon the aggregative evidence provided by large sample surveys. This brief note is an attempt to add to the literature by analysing the available evidence on the actual extent of marginalisation and discrimination apparently faced by different categories in the population, based on the results of the most recent large National Sample Survey.[3]

It is useful to begin with an assessment of the overall situation with respect to literacy. The continuing inability of the Indian state to ensure universal literacy and basic education must surely count among the most significant failures of the development project in the country. As is evident from Charts 1 and 2, in addition to the overall failure in average terms, there are substantial differences across different categories of population, not only among

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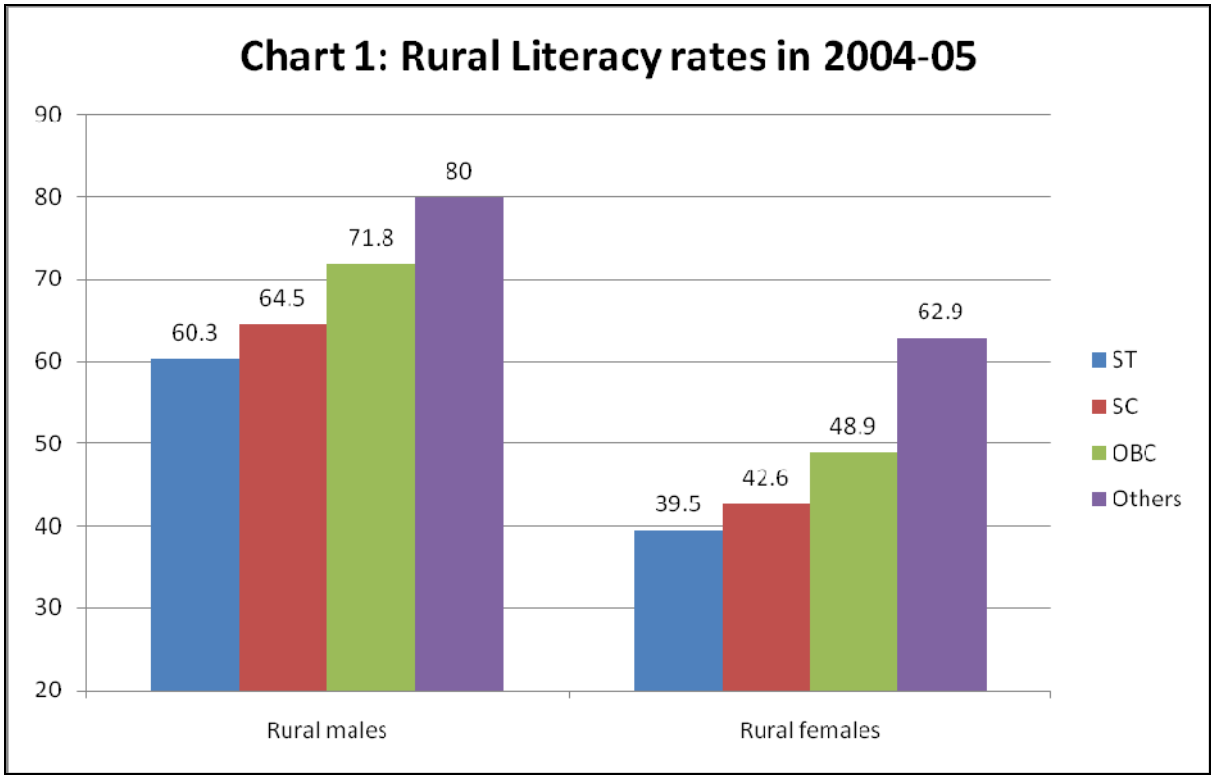
[2] Notably Mohanty 2007 and some articles in Thorat, ed, 2007.

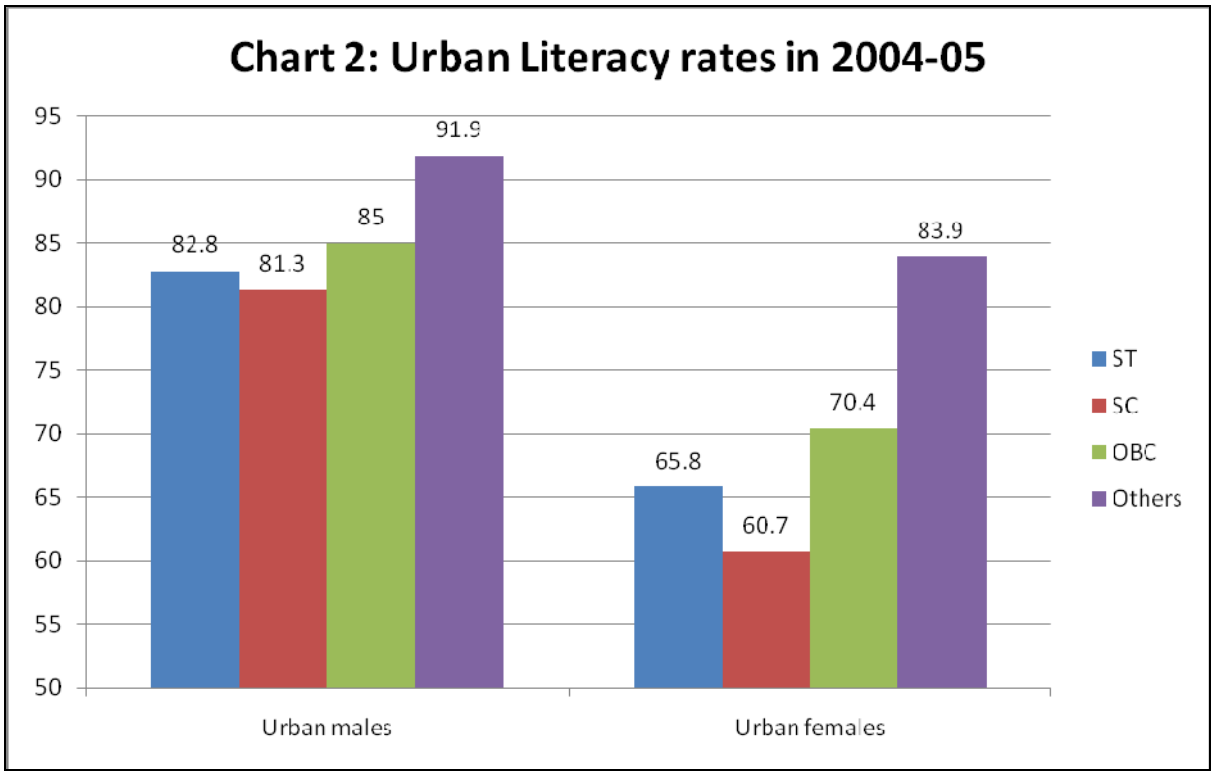
[3] In what follows, the basic source of data for all the tables and charts is "Employment and Unemployment Situation Among Social Groups in India, 2004-05", NSS 61st Round, NSSO, New Delhi October 2006.

rural and urban residents but also across social groups. While around one-third of India's population is illiterate according to this survey, the literacy rate is clearly much higher in urban areas. Furthermore, there are very marked differences across gender and caste. The literacy rate was the highest among the category *others* (78 per cent), which includes both upper caste Hindus as well as those of other religions.[4] This was followed by the OBCs with a gap of nearly 13 percentage points, then Scheduled Castes, and finally was the lowest among the STs (52 per cent). But it is to be noted that gender gaps were very marked and typically even higher than differences across social category, so that women among the socially deprived categories were the most highly discriminated even in terms of literacy. Thus, the gap between the group with the highest literacy rate – urban males of the "other" category – and the groups with the lowest literacy rate – rural females from Scheduled Tribes – was as high as 52.4 percentage points, or well more than double the lower rate!

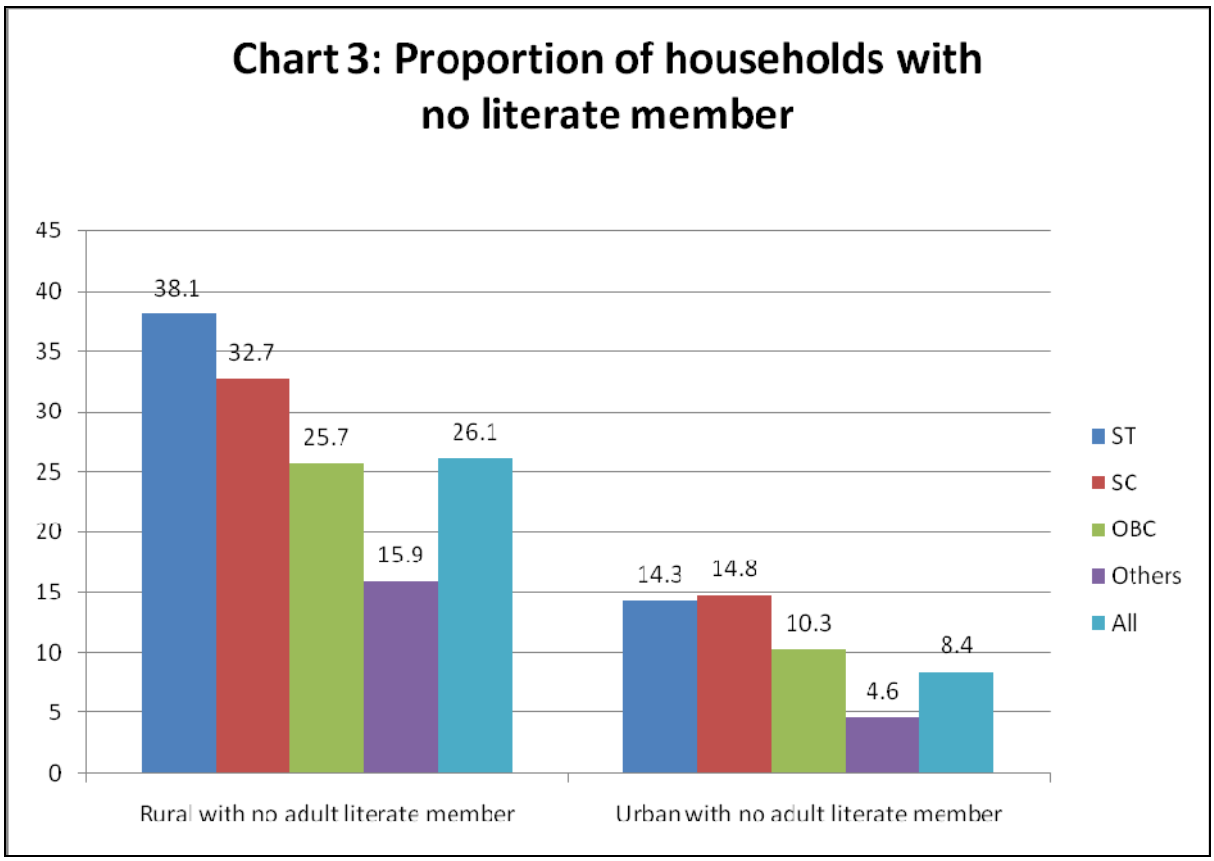


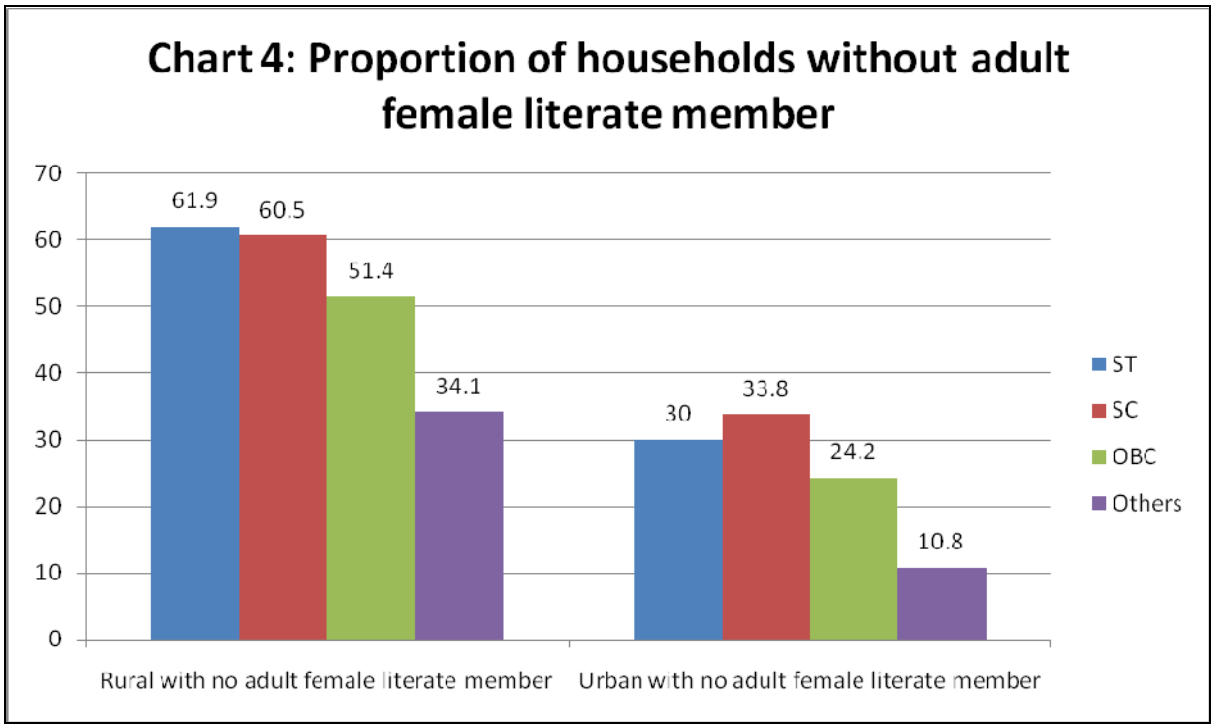
[4] It should be noted that this category is also not homogenous; in fact NSS data point to very significant differences between Muslims and all others especially in literacy and educational achievement – therefore, the differential position of "caste Hindus" would be much higher in relative terms.

It is worth noting that males of the "other category" appear to have high rates of literacy in both rural and urban areas, and the rural-urban gap (at just under 12 percentage points) is lower for this group than for any other social category. This helps to explain why the proportion of households with no literate member is also relatively low among the "other" category – less than 5 per cent in urban areas and around 15 per cent in rural areas.



About 26 per cent of the households in the rural areas and 8 per cent in the urban areas, had no literate adult member (of age 15 years and above). However, it is also evident from Chart 3 that in general less than 15 per cent of all urban households, of whatever social category, did not have a literate adult member. In rural areas, the position was much worse, with nearly two-fifths of ST households with no literate adult member.

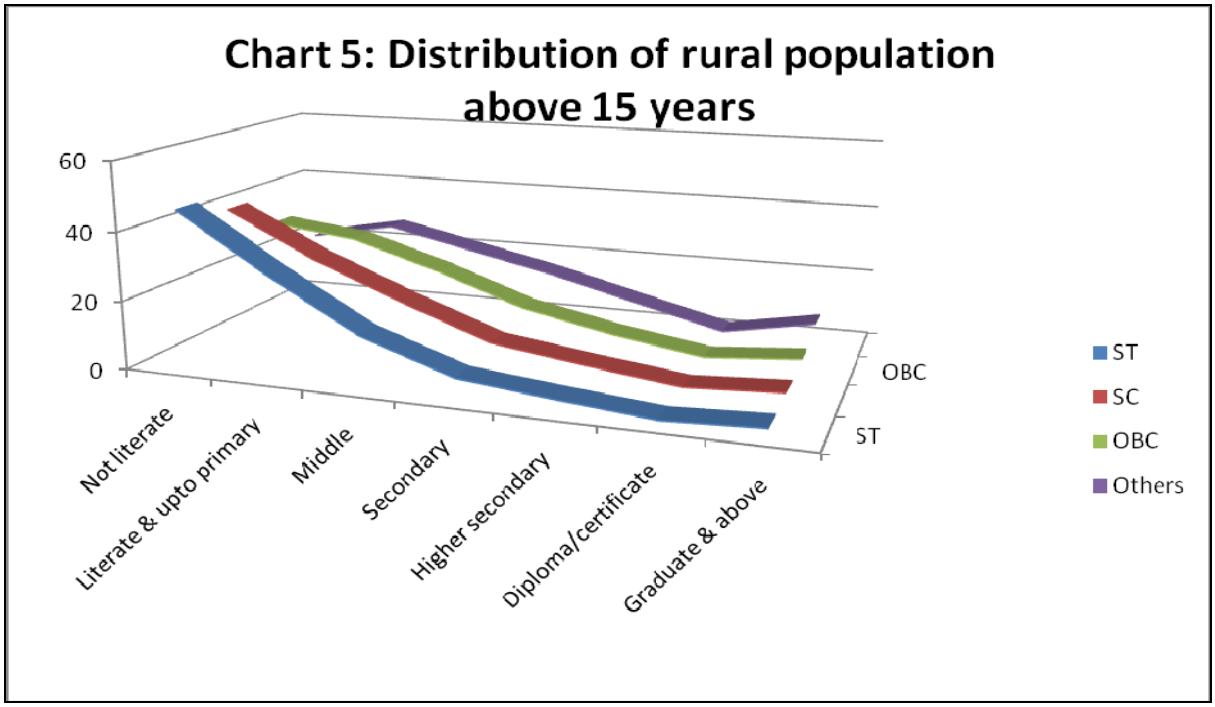




The significance of gender discrimination emerges from the much higher proportion of households who continue not to have any female adult literate member, as shown in Chart

4. The proportion of households without any literate adult member or without any literate adult *female* member was much higher among the households belonging to the STs and SCs compared to the OBCs or *others* category households in both rural and urban India. Among both STs and SCs, the proportion in rural areas was more than 60 per cent, while in urban areas it was in excess of 30 per cent, and here SC families were worse off than ST families. More than half of OBC households in rural areas did not have a literate adult female member.

These overall household-level figures are confirmed by the distribution of population by educational categories as shown in Charts 5 and 6 for rural and urban areas separately. It is not just that illiteracy rates are high among the deprived social groups, but the spread of higher education is also extremely low. Interestingly, the proportion of each rural social group that is literate and/or has received up to primary education is around the same – between 27 and 29 per cent. This may indicate the push for school enrolment in the age group 5-14 years through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. For those who have been excluded from this intitiative, because they were already too old to be enrolled in school, the gaps across cateogries remain very large – in illiteracy as well as in the extent of further education. Also dropout rates from schooling are significantly higher for deprived social categories, and therefore educational distinctions become progressively more marked across different social groups.



In urban areas the distinction is even sharper between certain categories. However, here it should be noted that the ST group exhibits rather different characteristics relative to the rural areas. Illiteracy rates among urban STs are lower than for urban SCs, and the proportion that has been through higher secondary or graduate and above education is higher for urban STs than for urban SCs or OBCs. Nevertheless, the gap between all three of these relatively deprived categories and "others" remains large, with more than one-fifth of the urban "other" population having been through graudate or higher education, compared to 9 per cent or less for all other categories.

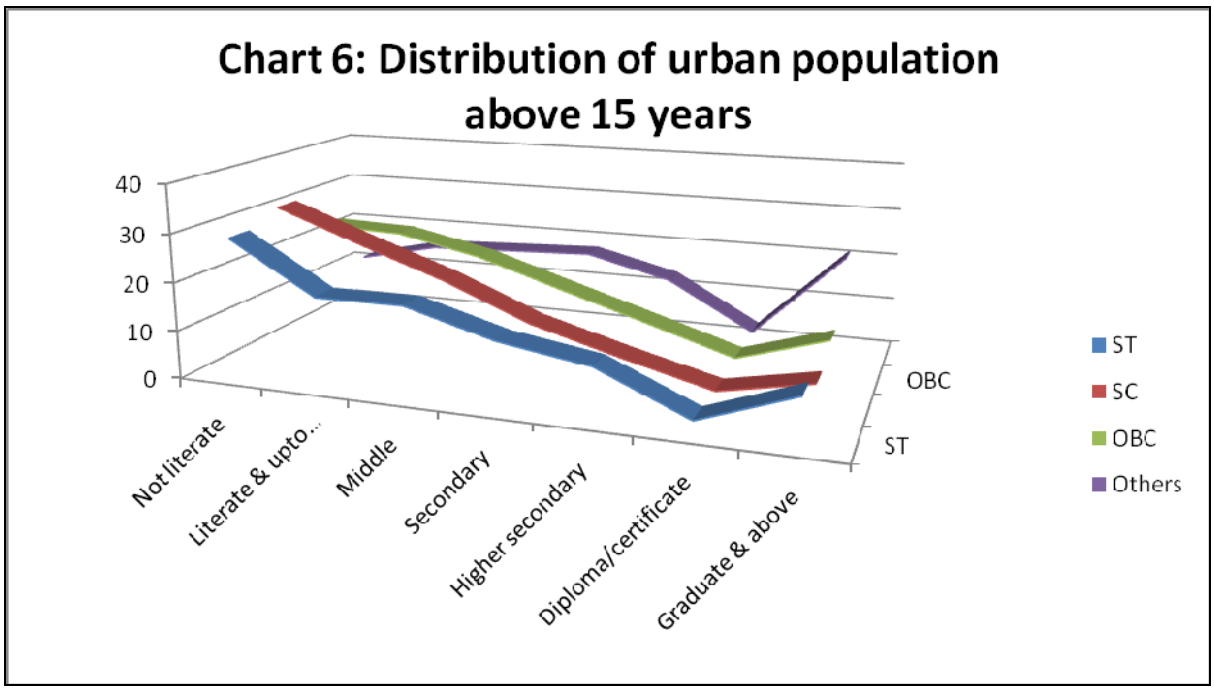
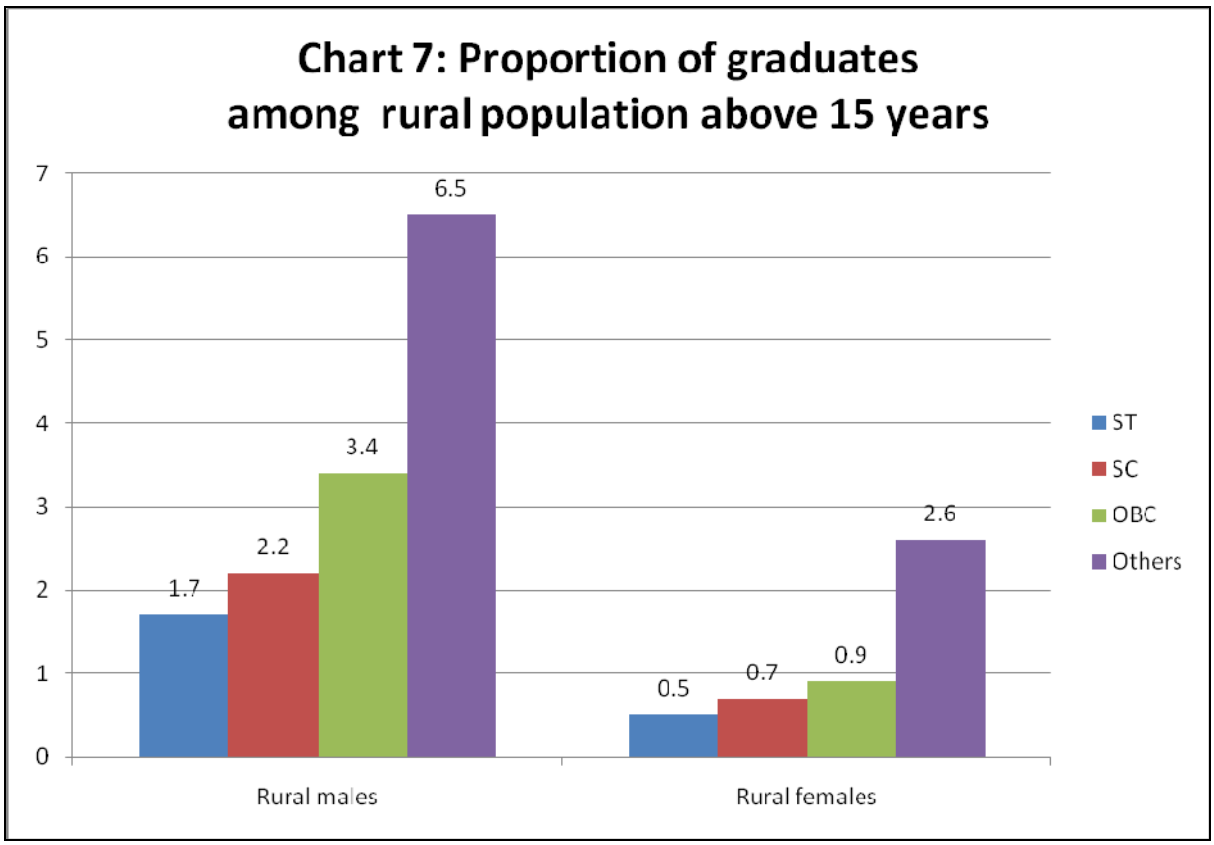
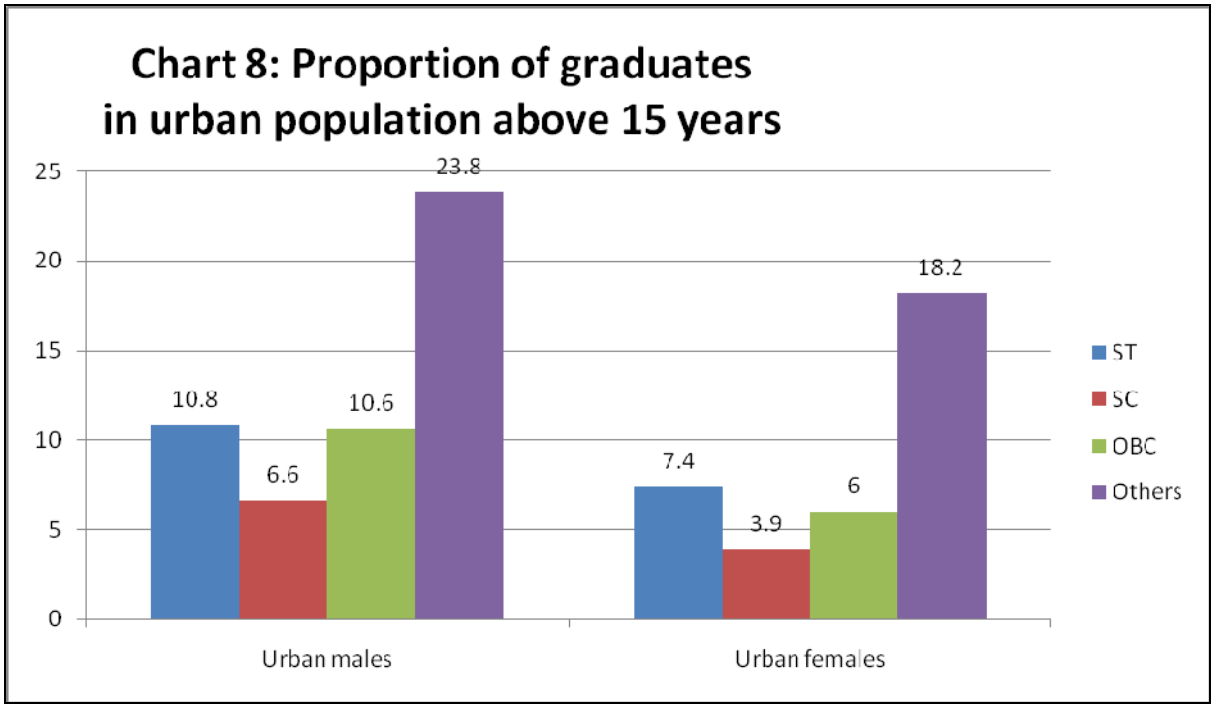


Chart 7 shows that in rural areas, among the male population only 1.7 per cent of STs and 2.2 per cent of SCs have received graduate or higher education, compared to 3.4 per cent of OBCs and 6.5 per cent of "others". Once again, gender gaps dominate over gaps across social category, with females in the best off group of "others" faring worse than males among OBCs, and the worst off rural emale category – STs – showing only 1.5 per cent having had graduate or higher education. In urban areas, the gender gap is substnatially reduced among the "others", and urban females in this group show higher rates of higher educarion than all other categories even among the males. Gender gaps do remain in the other categories, but they are proportionately less significant than among the rural population.





However, since these estimates are for the entire population, they may not provide accurate estimates of social differentiation in higher education among the relevant age-group.

Therefore, Table 1 provides data on the enrolment ratios among the age-cohort 20-24 years in both urban and rural areas. It can reasonably be supposed that this relates to higher education of some variety, whether in colleges, universitiies, institutes of technical training, etc. The data refer to the "Usual Status" of activity, which allows for both principal and subsidiary involvement (in other words, enrolment in part-time and distance learning courses is also included).

This confirms some of the conclusions from the earlier charts. In rural areas, gender gaps in enrolment in higher education remain very high and dominate over social category gaps, although the latter gaps are also very large. Among rural males, the basic gap is between "others" and the rest; there appears to be relatively little distance between the other three categories. Furthermore, enrolment among STs appears to have fallen slightly (though this may be due to statistical error) and enrolment among SCs and OBC to have increased slightly in the first five years of this decade.

Table 1: Proportion of age-group 20-24 years attending educational institutions in 1999-2000 and 2004-05

Year	ST	SC	OBC	Others
Rural males				
1999-2000	9.4	8.6	8.6	15.6
2004-05	8.6	9.7	10.8	14.9
Rural females				
1999-2000	4.8	2.6	2.4	6.2
2004-05	5.2	3.5	4.1	5.9
Urban males				
1999-2000	24.9	17.7	17.5	28.3
2004-05	32.1	17	19.7	27.8
Urban females				
1999-2000	15.4	11.2	9.7	22.5
2004-05	21.2	10.2	11.6	21.6

Among rural females, STs show higher enrolment in higher education than either SCs (who remain the lowest) and OBCs. There has been an improvement in the latter two, but

from very low bases. Among rural women, the gaps across social category do not appear to be very large, further emphasising the point that gender gaps dominate in enrolment in higher education in rural areas, and that young women are the most discriminated against regardless of social group.

In urban areas, the picture is somewhat different. First it should be noted that enrolment ratios appear to be reasonably high when compared to other developing countries at similar levels of income. The situation across social categories is more complicated. The "other" category has actually shown a slight decrease in enrolment for both urban males and females. For urban males, the gap between STs and "others" is not very large, and indeed has been reversed in the latest period consequent upon significant enrolment increases among STs, such that male STs in the age group 20-24 years showing a higher rate of enrolment in education than their "other" counterparts! However, there has been no increase in enrolment ratios for SC urban males, and only a marginal increase for OBCs.

Among urban females, also there was a significant increase in enrolment ratios of ST women and a slight increase in enrolment ratios of OBC women. However, enrolment ratios of both "other" and SC women actually declined. While these were small decreases and could reflect statistical error, it is important in the case of SCs because enrolment rates were already so low, especially when compared to the other categories.

What explains these patterns of enrolment in what must be some form of higher education? There are obviously both demand and supply conditions, as well as social and economic factors affecting the ability of different categories to access higher education. In terms of the desire for higher education, many factors play a role, but it is fairly obvious that perceptions of improved employment prospects are important. Therefore it is worth considering what the survey data have to tell us about the extent to which the probability of employment changes with higher education. Table 2 provides data on work participation rates and unemployment rates for those with at least secondary education, while Table 3 provides similar data for those with at least a graduate degree.

Table 2: Worker population rates and unemployment rates among population with at least secondary education

	ST	SC	OBC	Others
Rural males				
Worker population rate	71.9	71.9	75.7	76.2
Unemployment rate	4.6	6.6	3.9	4.1
Rural females				
Worker population rate	25.9	41.6	44.3	42.5
Unemployment rate	32.2	20.9	30.9	18.9
Urban males				
Worker population rate	67.4	63.5	71.3	71.8
Unemployment rate	4.3	8.6	5.6	4.4
Urban females				
Worker population rate	21.3	21.4	20.4	18.8
Unemployment rate	15.1	17.4	20.8	13

It is apparent from Table 2 that secondary education affects subsequent employment very differently according to social category. It should be noted that the worker population rate simply defines the proportion of people who have some gainful employment, whether in a wage/salary relationship or through self-employment, and says nothing about the quality of employment or whether the education and skills developed through secondary education are either required or being used in the job. Even so, the data are quite striking.

For rural males with secondary education, there appears to be little difference across social category in terms of either work participation rates or open unemployment rates. For rural females, however, there are huge differences across social category. While unemployment rates are high for all rural women secondary school graduates, they are particularly high for women from ST and OBC groups. Indeed, for a rural secondary school educated ST woman, the probability of being openly unemployed is higher than of being employed! (It is important to bear in mind that unemployment is here defined as being available and looking for work, and therefore excludes all voluntary or discouraged withdrawal from the labour force, which is also likely to be high among women.)

In urban areas, the highest rate of open unemployment among secondary school educated males is to be found among SCs. However, even here rates of open unemployment are much higher among women, and the highest rate of open unemployment of rural females with secondary schooling is to be found among OBCs, where once again it is higher than the work participation rate for this group.

Table 3: Worker population rates and unemployment rates among population with at least graduate education

	ST	SC	OBC	Others
Rural males				
Worker population rate	71.9	71.9	75.7	76.2
Unemployment rate	4.6	6.6	3.9	4.1
Rural females				
Worker population rate	25.9	41.6	44.3	42.5
Unemployment rate	32.2	20.9	30.9	18.9
Urban males				
Worker population rate	86.9	74	87.8	84.5
Unemployment rate	10	10.3	4.4	4.4
Urban females				
Worker population rate	46.9	43.8	40.6	35
Unemployment rate	16.7	27	18.5	15

Table 3, which provides similar evidence for those with at least graduate degrees, shows that somewhat similar tendencies are apparent for this subset. ST women graduates show the highest open unemployment rate in rural areas, while for urban areas it is highest for SC women graduates. Given these high open unemployment rates for women in particular, even after receiving higher education, it may not be so surprising that there is less enthusiasm for enrolment among these categories.

What insights do these data provide for strategies of affirmative action? First of all, it is evident that very large differences in educational attainment and access continue to exist

and therefore must be addressed through public action. Such action must necessarily include reservations, but there have to be other strategies *in addition*, to ensure wider and more democratic access. These can include more public provision of higher educational institutions in backward areas and for deprived groups, more scholarships and other incentives for deprived categories, etc.

Second, the data provided here have shown that the social reality of discrimination and marginalisation in higher education is a more complex mosaic than is often presented. Such complexity needs to be noted and addressed when designing public policies. In particular, some major gaps that are evident from these data need to be addressed. Most significant among them are the rural-urban gap and the gender gap, which cut across social categories especially in rural areas.

Third, it is also evident that higher education generates very different prospects of employment across social categories, and therefore strategies of affirmative action also have to incorporate actions designed to affect the labour market.