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CASTE SYSTEM AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The caste system has remained a major institution shaping social relations, status, occupation, marriage, education, and access to economic opportunities in India. Although constitutional provisions, education, urbanization, industrialization, democratic politics, migration, and affirmative action have created important avenues for social mobility, caste continues to influence the distribution of social and economic resources. This sociological study examines the relationship between caste hierarchy and patterns of social mobility in contemporary India, with particular attention to educational attainment, occupational change, economic advancement, political participation, and cultural transformation. The study draws upon sociological literature, government statistics, census information, and established theoretical perspectives on caste and mobility. M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization explains one form of positional mobility, while B. R. Ambedkar's critique highlights the structural inequalities that restrict genuine equality. Statistical evidence indicates substantial improvement in literacy and higher education participation among historically disadvantaged communities, although significant differences remain. The study also considers the role of reservation, urbanization, professional employment, migration, and democratic representation in creating new mobility pathways. It argues that social mobility in India has become more complex rather than simply replacing caste with class. Contemporary mobility increasingly combines educational achievement, occupational diversification, political power, economic resources, and changing caste identities.

Keywords: *Caste System, Social Mobility, Social Stratification, Sanskritization, Education, Affirmative Action.*

Introduction

Caste has historically organized Indian society through hereditary status, endogamy, occupational specialization, hierarchy, and unequal access to resources. Social mobility refers to movement between social positions through changes in education, occupation, income, status, or political influence. M. N. Srinivas demonstrated that caste was capable of adaptation and identified Sanskritization as one mechanism through which

lower caste groups sought higher local status. B. R. Ambedkar, however, viewed caste as a deeply entrenched system of graded inequality that could not be overcome merely through cultural imitation. Since Independence, constitutional safeguards, reservation, education, urbanization, migration and occupational diversification have expanded opportunities for mobility. Yet access to these opportunities remains uneven, making caste an important variable in understanding contemporary Indian social change.

Review of Indian Literature

1. **Srinivas (1952)** examined caste mobility through the concept of Sanskritization. He observed that lower caste communities adopted selected practices, rituals, dietary habits, and values associated with higher castes to improve their local social position. His work demonstrated that caste hierarchy could experience positional changes without necessarily undergoing structural transformation.
2. **Ambedkar (1936)** examined caste as a system of graded social inequality sustained through endogamy, religious ideas, and social separation. He argued that individual advancement could not by itself eliminate caste oppression and emphasized equality, liberty, fraternity, and institutional transformation as necessary conditions for genuine social emancipation.
3. **Desai and Kulkarni (2008)** examined educational inequalities among Indian social groups in the context of affirmative action. They found that caste differences in educational attainment had remained substantial despite policy interventions, while reservation and improved implementation had expanded educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities.
4. **Shah (2005)** examined changing caste relations and processes of social mobility in India. His work indicated that caste groups increasingly used education, occupational diversification, political organization, migration, and economic resources to improve their social position, while caste identities continued to influence collective mobilization and access to opportunities.
5. **Thorat (2007)** examined caste discrimination and economic exclusion in India. His analysis showed that disadvantaged caste groups had continued to experience unequal access to employment, markets, education, and other economic resources. He emphasized that economic development alone had not automatically removed caste-based discrimination and exclusion.

Statement of the Problem

The persistence of caste alongside expanding educational, occupational, economic, and political opportunities creates an important sociological problem. Although social mobility has increased among several caste groups, mobility has not occurred equally across communities. Historical disadvantage, unequal educational resources, discrimination, occupational segmentation, economic inequality, and social networks continue to influence opportunities. Therefore, the study examines how caste affects changing patterns of social mobility in contemporary India.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on caste and social mobility in contemporary India, particularly educational, occupational, economic, cultural, and political mobility. It considers Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and other social groups through sociological literature and secondary statistical evidence. The study also examines education, reservation, urbanization, migration, and changing occupations as important mobility mechanisms.

Objective of the Study

To examine how the caste system influences patterns of social mobility in contemporary India, particularly through education, occupation, economic advancement, and political participation.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data from sociological literature, Census publications, government reports, and peer-reviewed academic studies.

1. Caste Hierarchy, Sanskritization and Changing Patterns of Social Status

The relationship between caste and social mobility cannot be understood without examining the historical structure of caste hierarchy. Caste traditionally assigned individuals and groups a relatively fixed social position through birth. Status was closely associated with ideas of purity and pollution, hereditary occupation, restrictions on commensality, and marriage within the caste group. This structure did not mean that Indian society was completely without movement, but mobility was generally constrained by collective caste boundaries. M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization became particularly important because it challenged the assumption that caste was entirely static. Srinivas described Sanskritization as a process through which a lower caste attempted to raise its social position by adopting practices associated with a higher caste. Such practices could include changes in food habits, ritual observance, religious practices, dress, marriage customs, and patterns of social behaviour. The process could operate across generations and could be supported by increasing economic resources and political influence. Sanskritization therefore represented a form of positional mobility. A caste group could claim a higher position in the local hierarchy without fundamentally destroying the hierarchy itself. This distinction remains important because upward movement within a social structure is different from transformation of that structure. In many parts of India, caste groups acquired land, improved their economic position, entered education, developed associations, and used political organization to strengthen their claims to status. Economic and political power could therefore interact with ritual status. Srinivas's later work continued to examine caste mobility, dominant caste formation, and social change in rural India.

However, Sanskritization has limitations when used as a complete explanation of contemporary mobility. It can explain why a community changes its cultural practices, but it does not fully explain structural changes generated by education, industrial employment, constitutional rights, migration, democratic politics, or market participation. Contemporary caste mobility frequently involves movement away from traditional occupations rather than simply imitation of higher-caste cultural practices. A person from a historically disadvantaged caste may enter engineering, medicine, administration, teaching, banking, business, information technology, or other professional occupations. Such mobility changes economic position and life chances, even when caste identity remains important. Similarly, migration to cities can weaken some forms of village-based social control while creating new forms of caste association and networking. Urbanization has therefore produced both opportunities and new forms of caste organization. The evidence also suggests that mobility may be collective as well as individual. A caste association may demand political representation, educational institutions, reservations, welfare benefits, or recognition as a backward community. These demands demonstrate that caste remains politically meaningful even when traditional occupations decline. Carroll's reassessment of Sanskritization and Westernization warned against applying these concepts mechanically to historical and contemporary caste associations, indicating that actual social change was more complicated than a simple movement from traditional caste practices toward Westernization. The contemporary pattern is consequently multidimensional. Cultural mobility, educational mobility, occupational mobility, economic mobility, and political mobility can occur simultaneously, but they do not necessarily move at the same speed. A family may experience significant educational advancement while continuing to face social discrimination or marriage restrictions. Another family may acquire wealth but remain socially excluded in certain settings. This shows why caste mobility should be studied as a combination of status, resources, power, and social acceptance.

The continuing importance of caste can also be understood through the distinction between positional and structural mobility. Positional mobility occurs when one group improves its position relative to another within an existing hierarchy. Structural mobility occurs when wider economic, political, or institutional changes create new positions and opportunities for large sections of society. Modern education, salaried employment, democratic institutions, urban labour markets, affirmative action, and constitutional equality have contributed to structural changes in the conditions under which caste operates. Yet these changes have not eliminated inherited inequalities. Ambedkar's analysis provides an important counterpoint to the cultural mobility approach because he emphasized that caste was sustained through institutional and social mechanisms rather than simply through individual beliefs. His argument suggested that genuine equality required the weakening of caste-based restrictions themselves. This perspective remains relevant because an increase in the number of educated members of disadvantaged communities does not automatically mean that caste-based inequality has disappeared. Mobility can create new middle classes within historically marginalized communities, but benefits may remain unevenly distributed within those communities. Gender, rural residence, parental education, household income, region, and access to social networks can influence whether caste-based mobility becomes possible. Thus, the sociological

study of caste must move beyond the question of whether people have moved upward and examine the conditions under which mobility occurs, who gains from it, and whether the movement changes broader relations of power. Contemporary India illustrates a complex combination of persistence and transformation in which caste has adapted to new institutions while continuing to shape social opportunities.

2. Education as a Major Route of Caste-Based Social Mobility

Education has become one of the most important mechanisms of social mobility in India because it can provide access to occupations and social environments that were historically closed or restricted to many caste groups. Schooling and higher education have expanded opportunities for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and other historically disadvantaged communities. Education can generate mobility through several interconnected mechanisms. It improves literacy, provides credentials, expands access to professional occupations, increases awareness of constitutional rights, and enables individuals to participate in administrative and political institutions. The significance of education is particularly visible when historical literacy differences are considered. According to Census-based data presented by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes increased from 10.27% in 1961 to 66.1% in 2011. SC male literacy reached 75.2%, while SC female literacy reached 56.5% in 2011. This represents substantial long-term change. Nevertheless, the figures also show that gender and social-group inequalities continued within the gains achieved. Education therefore created new pathways without producing complete equality. The expansion of schooling has also influenced family aspirations. First-generation learners often enter education with the expectation that educational credentials will help them escape traditional occupational constraints. In many families, government employment, teaching, professional work, and higher education have acquired symbolic importance because they represent not only income but also social dignity. Educational mobility can therefore transform both material conditions and the perceived status of a household. The expansion of educational institutions has also encouraged migration from villages to towns and cities, creating wider networks beyond traditional caste communities.

Higher education provides a particularly significant route for occupational mobility. The All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22 reported approximately 27.1 lakh students from Scheduled Tribe communities, 1.63 crore students from OBC communities, and about 66.2 lakh students from Scheduled Caste communities in higher education. ST enrolment had increased by 41.6% from 19.14 lakh in 2017-18 to 27.11 lakh in 2021-22, while OBC enrolment increased by 27.3% during the same period, from about 1.28 crore to 1.63 crore. These figures demonstrate the growing participation of historically disadvantaged groups in higher education. Such expansion has important implications for social mobility because university credentials are increasingly connected with professional employment and public-sector opportunities. Affirmative action has played a major role in this process. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) noted that reservations in higher education and government employment had been important components of India's strategy for addressing historical caste inequalities. Reservation cannot be understood merely as a numerical policy because it also affects the social composition of institutions. When

students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter universities, they gain access to knowledge, professional networks, cultural capital, and employment information that may not have been available within their traditional social environments. Their mobility can also affect younger members of their families. A graduate who becomes a teacher, civil servant, doctor, lawyer, manager, or lecturer may create new educational expectations for siblings and children. Education can therefore produce intergenerational mobility, where the social position of one generation changes the opportunities available to the next.

At the same time, educational expansion has not removed inequalities in educational quality or access. Students from poorer households may attend schools with fewer resources, face difficulties in continuing education, or need to combine education with paid work. Regional differences also affect educational opportunities. Rural students may face greater travel distances and weaker access to specialized institutions. Gender adds another dimension because women from disadvantaged communities can experience multiple constraints involving household responsibilities, safety, financial limitations, and social expectations. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) emphasized that caste-based inequalities in education persisted despite affirmative action, demonstrating that formal access did not automatically create equal educational outcomes. Educational mobility can also produce social tensions. First-generation graduates may experience discrimination, stereotyping, or pressure to conceal caste identity. The university environment can become a space where caste identity is simultaneously weakened and made visible. Students may develop new political consciousness and community networks while also seeking individual professional mobility. Consequently, education has a dual sociological role. It can weaken dependence on hereditary occupations and provide access to new status positions, but it can also become a site where older inequalities are reproduced through unequal resources, discrimination, and social networks. The substantial increase in SC, ST, and OBC participation in higher education demonstrates meaningful institutional change, yet participation alone should not be treated as complete social equality. The quality of education, completion rates, employment after graduation, professional advancement, and social acceptance must also be examined to understand whether educational mobility translates into broader social mobility.

3. Occupational, Economic and Urban Mobility among Different Caste Groups

Occupational mobility represents another major dimension of caste transformation in India. Traditional caste relations were strongly connected with hereditary occupations, particularly in rural areas. Modern economic development introduced new occupations in manufacturing, administration, education, health services, transport, banking, commerce, information technology, construction, and other sectors. These changes weakened the direct relationship between caste and hereditary occupation, although they did not eliminate it. A person born into an agricultural labouring family can now become a teacher, government employee, entrepreneur, technician, or professional. Similarly, members of traditionally higher-status castes increasingly enter occupations unrelated to their historical social roles. This occupational diversification has contributed to the growth of new middle classes across several caste groups. Economic resources can also change the local balance of power. Land ownership,

business income, professional employment, education, and access to state institutions can provide communities with greater bargaining power. Srinivas's idea of the dominant caste demonstrated that numerical strength, land ownership, political influence, and social status could combine to shape village power relations. Contemporary mobility has expanded this process beyond agriculture because urban employment and professional occupations have become increasingly important. The emergence of caste-based professional associations and urban networks also demonstrates that caste has not disappeared with occupational modernization. Instead, caste identities have adapted to new economic settings. A successful professional may live in a metropolitan city, work in a modern organization, and participate in a caste association at the same time. Caste therefore operates through both traditional and modern institutions.

Urbanization is particularly important because cities can weaken certain forms of direct caste surveillance. In villages, caste relations may influence neighbourhoods, occupations, marriage, social interaction, and access to community resources. Cities provide greater anonymity and occupational diversity. People from different caste groups work together in offices, factories, educational institutions, hospitals, shops, and public organizations. Migration can therefore increase opportunities for occupational mobility and reduce dependence on traditional village occupations. However, urbanization does not necessarily eliminate caste. Caste networks may assist migrants in finding housing, employment, credit, marriage partners, and social support. Employers and informal networks can also reproduce caste preferences. Economic mobility may therefore coexist with caste-based social boundaries. Ambedkar's analysis of caste and land relations is relevant here because he identified material control over resources as an important basis of caste inequality. Kumar's analysis of Ambedkar's economic thought similarly highlighted the relationship between land monopoly, caste power, and the vulnerability of landless Dalits. This suggests that occupational mobility must be examined alongside ownership of productive resources. A salaried worker may have greater income than a traditional agricultural labourer but still lack assets, land, social networks, or institutional power. Similarly, entrepreneurship may provide economic independence while exposure to discrimination in markets remains possible. Mobility is therefore not simply a question of changing one's occupation. It involves changes in security, income, wealth, workplace status, social networks, and decision-making power.

The intersection of caste and economic mobility becomes particularly visible when different social groups are compared. Historical disadvantage can affect the resources available before an individual enters the labour market. Families with educated parents can provide stronger educational support, information about careers, and professional contacts. Families with fewer resources may depend more heavily on low-paid informal employment. These differences can reproduce inequality even when legal barriers have been removed. The importance of social capital is therefore considerable. A candidate may possess educational qualifications but still face difficulty obtaining employment if recruitment depends heavily on informal contacts. Formal merit and actual opportunity can consequently diverge. Caste associations can operate in both directions. They may provide scholarships, hostels, mentoring, employment information, and community support, thereby facilitating mobility. At the same

time, strong caste networks can reinforce social closure when opportunities are distributed primarily within particular groups. Contemporary caste mobility should therefore be understood through a combination of education, occupation, income, assets, migration, and networks. The expansion of higher education documented by AISHE provides evidence that participation among disadvantaged groups has increased, but educational participation must be connected with employment outcomes to determine the extent of actual economic mobility. The experience of mobility is also not uniform within any caste category. Some households have entered professional and middle-class occupations while others remain concentrated in casual labour and insecure employment. This internal differentiation is sociologically significant because caste categories contain considerable economic diversity. Economic mobility can consequently transform the internal structure of caste groups, producing new elites, middle classes, political leaders, professionals, and entrepreneurs. These developments have altered caste relations without making caste irrelevant.

4. Political Participation, Reservation and the Transformation of Caste Identity

Political participation has become an important mechanism through which caste groups seek social mobility and collective recognition. Democratic institutions created new opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities to participate in elections, legislatures, local government, political organizations, and public policy debates. Political representation can provide access to resources and influence over public institutions. Caste groups increasingly organize around demands related to education, employment, reservation, land, welfare, recognition, and political representation. This process demonstrates that caste has changed from being primarily a system of inherited social status into a significant basis of collective political organization. The constitutional framework prohibited untouchability and established safeguards for disadvantaged communities, while reservation policies created institutional opportunities in education, public employment, and political representation. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) documented the importance of affirmative action in expanding access for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, particularly in higher education and government employment. Reservation has consequently contributed to the emergence of educated groups and public-sector professionals from communities that had historically experienced exclusion. The significance of such mobility extends beyond individual beneficiaries. Government employees, teachers, administrators, and political representatives from disadvantaged communities can become visible symbols of social advancement. Their presence may challenge older assumptions about status and occupation. At the same time, debates over reservation demonstrate that caste remains a major factor in competition over social and economic opportunities.

Political mobilization also illustrates the changing relationship between caste identity and modernity. Rather than disappearing with education and urbanization, caste identity may become more consciously organized. Communities establish associations, educational trusts, welfare organizations, professional networks, and political platforms. These institutions can provide scholarships, hostels, legal assistance, employment guidance, and collective bargaining capacity. The emergence of such organizations indicates that caste can function as a

resource for mobility. At the same time, political caste mobilization can strengthen boundaries between groups when political competition is organized primarily around community identity. The relationship between caste and democracy is therefore complex. Democratic institutions can weaken hereditary privilege by creating equal political citizenship, but electoral competition can also make caste identities politically valuable. Srinivas's work on caste and social change helps explain why caste has adapted rather than simply disappeared. His approach emphasized that Indian caste structures could respond to economic, political, and cultural transformations. More recent sociological work similarly shows that communities may strategically modify identity depending on political and economic circumstances. A 2025 study of Kudmi-Mahato migrants in North Bengal, for example, found that adopting higher-caste surnames did not necessarily produce actual upward mobility and that some participants later emphasized Indigenous identity in relation to affirmative-action opportunities. This example demonstrates that caste identity can be strategically negotiated rather than simply inherited or abandoned. People may emphasize, modify, or reorganize identity depending on the opportunities and constraints associated with particular social classifications.

Political and institutional mobility nevertheless faces important limitations. Representation does not always guarantee equal access to resources within disadvantaged communities. Better-educated and economically stronger sections may capture a larger share of opportunities, while poorer households remain excluded. Gender inequalities are also important because political representation and community leadership have historically been uneven between men and women. Furthermore, legal equality does not automatically eliminate social prejudice. Ambedkar's critique remains relevant because he distinguished formal equality from substantive equality. His analysis emphasized that caste was sustained by social relations and institutional practices, meaning that legal reform alone could not completely transform everyday social life. Contemporary mobility therefore involves a continuing tension between individual advancement and collective transformation. A person may acquire education, employment, income, and political influence while caste-based discrimination continues in marriage, housing, social interaction, or employment. Conversely, collective caste organization can provide disadvantaged groups with political bargaining power and institutional resources. Social mobility thus changes the meaning of caste without necessarily removing caste identity. The growth of higher education among SC, ST, and OBC students illustrates the expanding institutional presence of communities historically excluded from advanced education. The continuing literacy gap among social groups and genders demonstrates that unequal starting points remain important. The sociological significance of political and institutional mobility therefore lies in its ability to alter who has access to authority, education, employment, and public representation. Caste in contemporary India should consequently be understood as a changing institution that interacts with democracy, state policy, education, markets, migration, and social movements. Its influence has shifted from rigid hereditary ordering toward more flexible but still unequal forms of identity, networks, competition, and political organization.

Conclusion

Caste continues to influence social mobility in India despite major changes in education, occupation, urbanization, democracy, and public policy. The expansion of higher education, reservation, professional employment, migration, and political participation has created significant opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities. Statistical evidence demonstrates substantial progress in literacy and higher education participation among SC, ST, and OBC groups. However, unequal resources, discrimination, gender differences, occupational insecurity, and inherited social networks continue to shape mobility. Srinivas helps explain positional mobility through Sanskritization, while Ambedkar highlights the structural character of caste inequality. Contemporary India therefore reflects both caste transformation and caste persistence, making social mobility a multidimensional and continuing sociological process.

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