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Determinants of Social Mobility in India and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to assess the determinants of social mobility in Indian society and provide nuanced policy recommendations to improve mobility for the immobile sections. This paper is both review-oriented and recommendatory. Using secondary data, this study analysed the complex interplay between caste, migration, and education as determinants of social mobility. Furthermore, the paper studies intersectionality as an approach for assessing social mobility, focusing on secondary determinants such as gender, religion, marriage, and geography. Does access to education undermine the origin-destination association? Why do some religious groups experience a decreasing relative social mobility? Have linkages between caste and outcomes weakened post-economic liberalisation? Does merit take precedence over caste in determining opportunities available to individuals in modern India? How is the rural women's experience different from urban women with regards to social mobility? How do migration patterns influence mobility trends? The study unravelled myriad correlations between multiple determinants and stark sectional variations in the social mobility for different sub-groups. Using insights from these interplays between different determinants, the paper puts forth several policy recommendations which will improve mobility for the lesser 'opportune' classes, thereby undermining intergenerational socio-economic inequalities which continue to plague the Indian society.

Keywords: *Social Mobility, Caste, Intersectionality, Migration, Education, Inequality*

1.0 Introduction

Social mobility is used to determine the extent to which an individual's starting point in life affects their prospects of growth and development. If someone raised in a family belonging to particular income strata pursues an occupation in a similar skill and income group, it is an indicator of a lower rate of social mobility. However, if all groups of people can pursue professions independent of their existent socio-economic backgrounds, it brings inclusivity in the society and promotes equality of opportunity, thus overall contributing to higher social mobility. This study has analysed the barriers to social mobility, i.e., the different factors which may hamper an individual's chances to access better social and economic opportunities and rewards.

On the Human Development Index (HDI) released in 2020, India stands at 131 out of the 188 countries *(Dhawan, 2020)*. Though India has been able to move a large amount of the populace out of poverty since independence, health inequities, child malnutrition, and caste-based atrocities are still rampant. Social mobility in India is quite low and was ranked 76th out of 82 economies in the 2020 Social Mobility Index compiled by the World Economic Forum *(Press Trust of India, 2020)*. To some extent, this can be attributed to the large size of the Indian demographic and their dependence on historical jobs. Many other factors contribute to this problem which this paper wishes to discuss in detail along with prospective solutions. It is crucial to understand that social mobility brings Economic Growth. *(The Global Social Mobility Report 2020 Equality, Opportunity and a New Economic Imperative, 2020)* Certain factors hinder India from reaching its true economic potential. If the mobility inducing changes are brought along steadily, such as creating more jobs in the non-farming sector as well as proper street planning with regards to increasing urban migration, it can accelerate the progress on India's goal to reach a GDP equivalent of $5 trillion. *(Sankhe et al., 2020)*

Through a detailed analysis of the determinants of social mobility, this study puts forth numerous policy measures which will make socially immobile communities more mobile and will help achieve the promise of equality of opportunity. This analysis -- and the following recommendations -- establish a starting point for achieving the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by using intersectionality as an approach. In this regard, while primarily this study focuses on SDG 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all) and SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among), it also helps us achieve SDG 4, 5 and 16 through this study's focus on equitable education, reduction in gender disparities, and promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies as a tool to improve social mobility.

SDG	Description
4 QUALITY EDUCATION	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities

5 GENDER EQUALITY	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all
10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	Reduce inequality within and among
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels

2.0 What is Social Mobility?

Social mobility can be broadly defined as the extent to which individuals can move between different socio-economic strata or positions. This can be calculated in reference to their lifetime, or in comparison to their previous generations. The nature of social mobility in a society strongly determines the quality of opportunities available and the eventual outcomes for individuals. Studying social mobility in society helps us understand that while all individuals might not have equality of outcome, they must have access to equal opportunities.

Strong social mobility in a society provides opportunities for redistribution of not just wealth, but other socio-economic opportunities and rewards. On the contrary, lack of social mobility implies barriers to equality of opportunity and will eventually result in the perpetuation of pre-existing socio-economic disparities between different communities. Pitirim A. Sorokin, 55th President of the American Sociological Association, coined the term 'Social Mobility'. He first

discussed the term in his book '*Social and Cultural Mobility'*, wherein he argued that no society is completely open and no society is completely closed, i.e., all societies allow or discourage different types of socio-economic movements which are guided by their internal factors.

2.1 Key Concepts in Social Mobility

Possible trajectories of mobility include horizontal mobility and vertical mobility. *Horizontal mobility* implies being displaced within the same socioeconomic strata. An example of this is a Professor who leaves one University to join a similar paying job at a University in a different geographical region. This form of mobility or movement does not influence social mobility because while it may cause geographical or organisational movements, it leads to no change in the individual's socio-economic strata. On the other hand, *Vertical mobility* implies movement from one socioeconomic stratum to another; this can be either upward or downward. Upward mobility comprises moving above the socio-economic ladder whereas downward mobility implies the opposite. An example of upward mobility would be the promotion of a University Professor to the Head of Department. As vertical mobility directly impacts the socio-economic positioning of an individual, it is a prime illustrator of social mobility.

In addition, mobilities are categorised depending on the period over which they are analysed. *Intragenerational mobility* refers to a change in an individual's socioeconomic status, such as occurs when an individual works his way up the corporate ladder. This is measured during an individual's lifetime. On the contrary, *Intergenerational mobility* refers to a change in social status across and between generations. For instance, when a person from a lower‑class family gets a well-paying job associated with high-class families.

Furthermore, social mobility has also been categorised into *structural and individual mobility.* Major shifts in socio-economic variables can influence the mobility opportunities of a large segment of people at the same time - this is referred to as structural mobility. In this, a specific class, community or occupational group observes considerable vertical movement -- upward or downward -- in relation to other strata within the socio-economic hierarchy. However, not all mobilities are structural. Individual characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, education, etcetera play an important role in determining the social mobility for an individual, and may even pose an opposite pressure as compared to structural mobility on the social mobility for that individual.

2.2 Equality of Opportunities and Outcomes

Equality of opportunity is a concept which analyses the extent to which the quality of life opportunities available differs depending on the individuals' background. An example of this could be as follows: There are 10 students in a class and each was provided with a slate and chalk for their classwork, irrespective of their socio-economic background. *Equality of outcome*, on the contrary, deals with how some determinants can influence life outcomes for individuals even if they had access to the same set of opportunities. An example of this could be as follows: All 10 students had access to a slate and chalk, but five used their board for writing class notes, three of them used their board for drawing, while the rest didn't use their board for anything

3.0 Analysis & Discussion

3.1 Social Mobility in India

As of 2020, India has been ranked very low at 76th place out of 82 countries on a new Social Mobility Index compiled by the World Economic Forum *(The Global Social Mobility Report 2020 Equality, Opportunity and a New Economic Imperative, 2020). A*s explained by Divya Vaid, Indian society is 'remarkable' for its intergenerational class stability and reproduction of inequalities. Ironically, India is a diverse society with numerous social, religious and ethnic groups, yet some outdated practices and policies inhibit mobility. In the sections below, the paper will assess the different factors which influence stratification in India, and act as barriers to vertical mobility.

3.2. Caste System as a Determinant of Social Mobility

Even today in modern India, some sects still believe in the ideology of caste-based adoption of occupations. It hampers inclusivity and restricts people with different aspirations to be constrained to a particular occupation, which contributes to an unfulfilled life. The controversial practice of caste-based hierarchy in the Indian scenario is a keen determinant of the mobility of individuals in India. The practice long thought by some people to be influential in antiquity is still driving socio-economic changes in India. The vertical hierarchy, established in the Rig Veda - which dictates that if the society is a human body, Brahmins make up the head, Kshatriyas symbolize the arms, Vaishyas made up the torso and that the Shudras constitute the feet - still prevails. The bigger challenge is that even when the law protects the lower caste groups, they have

accepted the dominance of the upper castes. (*Anikeeva, 2020*) The table below has been cited from an article in the Economic and Political Weekly from 2002. The data shows the relationship between a person's caste and the percentage of their caste being represented in a certain occupation group. The data has a slight bias for representing only men *(Kumar et al., 2002)*

Table 5: Community and Class
(Row percentages)

Caste/Community	Son's Class								
	Higher Salariat	Lower Salariat	Business	Petty Business	Skilled and Semi-Skilled	Unskilled Labourer	Farmer	Lower Agri-cultural	N
Upper	20.4	4.1	14.2	6.2	11.1	4.7	17.8	21.5	1089
OBC	7.1	2.4	5.0	5.2	16.9	11.1	12.6	39.8	1490
Dalit	6.1	4.8	2.2	3.1	16.3	24.8	4.1	38.6	809
Adivasi	4.4	2.6	1.5	2.6	7.2	16.9	19.0	45.9	390
Muslim	8.2	2.5	8.4	13.9	22.4	12.3	6.2	26.0	438
Other	17.8	1.7	11.9	1.7	22.9	10.2	16.9	16.9	118
All	10.4	3.3	7.0	5.6	15.2	12.7	12.3	33.5	4334

The interpretations one can draw from this data are that the upper class has the highest proportionate representation in Salariat and Business at 20.4% and 14.2% respectively, Adivasis have the highest representation in the lower Agricultural sector at a whopping 46% with Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Dalits having almost equal representation in that sector at 39.8% and 38.6% respectively, Dalits have the highest representation in Unskilled Labour sector at 24.8%. This data goes on to prove that one's cast adversely affects their employment opportunities. Occupational mobility is almost non-existent as apart from the upper class no other group even touches the 10% mark in the Higher Salariat group, while most of the OBCs, Dalits and Adivasis are employed in the bottom 4 groups of Skilled/Semi-Skilled, Unskilled, Farmer and Lower Agriculture.

3.3. Migration Trends as a Determinant of Social Mobility

Internal migration in India is quite high, but it is mostly intrastate, such as moving from one block/district to another. People migrate to different areas in search of better opportunities, but the administration of a particular area (which hosts the migrants) doesn't consider them as their people; for various government jobs, reservations and other areas of interest, they provide preference to the natives of that particular area. This affects social mobility adversely. When we

talk of mobility in migration, upward mobility is generally witnessed when the migration is rural-urban and urban-urban. However, India is a unique case; 2011 Census data suggests that migration in terms of upward mobility was equivalent to 160 million people, which accounted for only one-third of the total migration in that year. (*Iyer, 2020*).

We can anticipate that the much-awaited 2021 Census will reflect an overall decrease in rural-urban migration due to consistent COVID-19 lockdowns throughout the year 2020, thus lowering India's overall mobility score. Our only hope to catch up on a decade's work is to provide health benefits as well as economic incentives for people to migrate back to urban areas. The perspective of the migrant labourers reflects that their motive is survival. The administration needs to ensure that if they migrate back to cities in a health emergency, their right to life will be sustained.

3.4 Education Trends as a Determinant of Social Mobility

Exposure to education has been perceived as a catalyst for social mobility. The importance of education in determining upward mobility has been established in sociological research. India has had a history of affirmative action policies in public sector jobs and education. These 'reservation' policies have been targeted towards socially and educationally backward communities categorized as SC (Scheduled Castes), ST (Scheduled Tribes), and OBCs. Despite the presence of these policies, multiple studies have found the influence of factors such as caste, gender, and a class of origin on the opportunities of access with regards to education *(Vaid, D. V. 2018)*. In other words, while we study the role of education as a factor of determining social mobility, access to education in itself is determined by other factors, such as class, caste and gender *(Vaid, 2018)*.
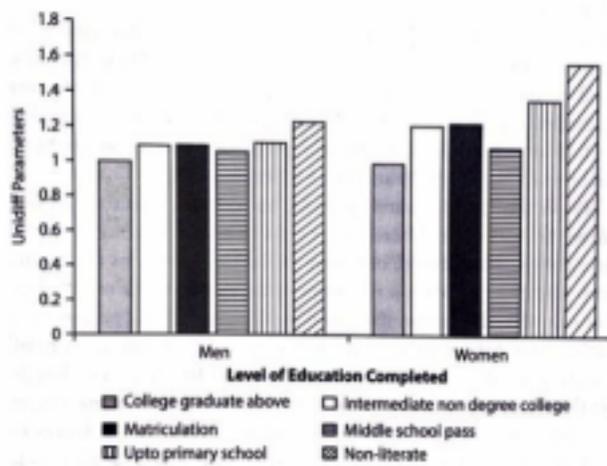
Figure: Unidiff Parameter Estimates of OD

Association across Levels of Education, Men and Women,

Source: NES 2014, CSDS Data Unit

In the above graph, we use Unidiff parameter estimates to study what mobility patterns (OD association) are in relative mobility terms across levels of education. Here, a college degree is set to one and any parameter greater than one implies a stronger origin-destination association for people with that educational level, and hence, lower fluidity (Vaid 2018). Any parameter less than one implies a weaker association, and hence, higher fluidity. Through the graph, we can broadly observe a positive correlation between education levels and level of social mobility. In other words, it can be inferred that with a greater level of education, there seems to be an increase in social mobility. It is also observed that the association between class or origin and the final destination is the weakest for college graduates - male or female. In other words, college graduates seem to be the most mobile as compared to other groups at the educational level.

3.5 Intersectionality as an Approach to Assessing Mobility: Religion, Gender and Location

While studying mobility patterns, it is extremely important to take into consideration how multiple determinants influence and interplay with each other resulting in complex mobility patterns across generations and communities.

The term *intersectionality* was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a civil rights activist and scholar in 1989. In a paper for the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Crenshaw opined that traditional

feminist ideas and antiracist policies exclude black women because they face overlapping discrimination unique to them. "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take *intersectionality* into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated," she wrote in the paper.

While from a research perspective, it may be convenient to focus on individual determinants separately, the impact of these determinants is not isolated from one another. This calls for greater *intersectionality* in our approach for an analysis of social mobility given that factors like gender, religion and location continue to influence other determinants of social mobility. Indian women who attend college undergo greater social mobility when compared to college-educated men (Vaid, 2018). This elucidates that while fewer women are in college education, the minority who end up having access to it experience greater mobility when compared to men. Here, we can see how an interplay of different determinants influences how different subgroups experience social mobility.

Interestingly, women in urban areas experience greater mobility as compared to men in urban areas, despite the fact that fewer women as compared to men have access to opportunities of migration from rural to urban areas. In other words, while there exist significant barriers to education and migration for women, the minority of women who happen to move to urban areas experience greater social mobility compared to a man in a similar situation. Furthermore, there are wide rural-urban variations in mobilities. Rural India is more intergenerationally stable as compared to urban areas, which allow for greater opportunities for policy interventions (Vaid, 2018).

Recent mobility research in India has engaged with an interesting sociological aspect: the institution of marriages. As the Indian society largely follows the arranged marriage concept, the country provides a unique case study for analysing 'marriage markets' as a factor in determining the social mobility of families, genders, and individuals. Marriages in India are integral to maintaining caste-class hierarchies given the prominence of endogamous arranged marriages. There is more intergenerational stability for women through marriage than for married men through their employment (Vaid, 2018). Hence, it is fair to argue that marriage is less of an arena

for mobility, and more of a mechanism to ensure that class hierarchies and statuses are conserved. It is also observed that lower caste women are not as socially mobile in India as proposed under the 'hypergamy argument'. On the other hand, high caste parents are able to use marriage as a mechanism to maintain their daughter's class position to a greater level than they are for their sons.

It is seen that even after several social and economic changes, upward mobility has barely changed from the 1950s to the 1980s birth cohorts (Asher, Novosad, Rafkin, 2021). This lack of overall mobility consists of substantial gains for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, in terms of mobility, and a substantial decrease of mobility for Muslims. The diminishing mobility for Muslims in India needs greater research and data to help determine the factors which cause it.

4.0 Policy Recommendations for better Social Mobility

It is imperative to understand that betterment can be initiated only if we reflect upon the existing parameters and work for improvement in specific areas of expertise. Below is a topic-wise list of recommendations for enhancing Social Mobility in India.

4.1. Increase Migration in a Sustainable Manner

Migration is essential everywhere due to the lack of a perfect society with equitable distribution of resources. It is a key challenge for the administration to ensure that migration takes place in a manner that does not exert pressure on the already crippling resources of the region where people migrate to. Migration does provide people with the opportunities for self-development to climb up the social ladder, but to initiate it healthily, a consensus needs to be built up between the natives and the migrants to decide a resource sharing ratio in the context of facilities and reservation(s) based on meritocracy with the State Government being the adjudicator to mitigate and remediate these conflicts. Specialised Working Groups that are made up of qualified individuals representing their specific communities can also be created at a local level to coordinate the progress on the policy actions undertaken as well as for dispute settlement.

4.2. Indiscriminate Dissemination of Quality Education

To be eligible for some work, one needs to attain a certain qualification level. In the Indian scenario, there is a greater emphasis on education as a level of qualification. Understandably, a

degree in itself does not ensure that a candidate possesses real-life skills. But it is also possible that certain Industry skills can be ingrained as a part of the school level curriculum to make people more competitive. If people, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds are provided equal access to quality education, it can do wonders in improving India's mobility ranking. Work experience ingrained in pedagogy can increase the hiring chances of a candidate. Recruiters don't just look for theoretical knowledge of the subject matter, they want to know if the person is capable of handling situations on the field. This can be facilitated by organizing internship camps at the Middle school level. Secondary research in the form of Extended Essays can also be used as a determinant in calculating Grade Point Average. Suggestions for the Secondary Schooling Curriculum include making labour-intensive projects as part of academic Elective subjects. Project Hackathons can also be organized to enhance the time management skills of students.

4.3. Providing more Social benefits in the Secondary and Tertiary Sector

India is still a society bound by agriculture. Such dependence on one sector causes 'Disguised Unemployment'. Farmers continue working in the field of agriculture believing that they have job security, in the sense that if they don't get a good price for their crops, they will still have food for sustenance. It deters them from moving beyond their zone of comfort. To rectify this, there is a need for increasing social benefits such as paid leave, maternity/paternity leave, realistic working hours, wage raise/increments, job security etcetera in the secondary and tertiary sectors to motivate people for naturally increasing competence and working in such jobs. It is crucial to acknowledge that not all farmers have the resources to access education; hence, there is a widespread need for increasing access to E-learning platforms like the Vidya Mitra portal launched under the National Mission on Education through Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Platforms like this are beneficial for people who are not eligible for a Degree/Diploma program as they lack school level education. Such measures increase the probability of a farmer/ unskilled labourer pursuing a White-collar job, therefore bringing out Intergenerational Mobility as the result.

4.4. Mandatory Sensitisation Workshops for Caste, Gender and Religion

The state should mandate the conduction of sensitisation workshops in educational institutions and workplaces targeting gender, caste and religious literacy/awareness. These workshops will

focus on training students and employees to better engage with their counterparts, leading to not only a better learning environment but also an overall reduction in discriminatory practices with regards to gender, religion or caste.

4.5. Monitored Movement of Backward Communities into more 'Opportune' Regions

As research shows, determinants of mobility are hyperlocal. While policymakers need to focus on investing into turning lesser 'opportune' localities into more socially mobile, this may only yield results in the long run. In the short run, the government can spearhead monitored migration of socially and economically backwards communities from lesser mobile regions into localities with higher average social mobility. Newer localities with a greater average social mobility will provide the backward family with better odds at moving up the socio-economic ladder.

4.6. Efficient and Comprehensive Data Collection

Studies on social mobility in India have been sparse and limited due to the lack of reliable and comprehensive data. The government needs to ensure comprehensive and safe data collection of all citizens so that long term social mobility trends can be intricately measured. Availability of specific local data at a national level would help unravel insights leading to precise policy interventions. Furthermore, this data needs to include communities that have for decades been out of the purview of mobility research. This includes women, whose data has been grossly under-recorded, and transgender individuals, who are completely out of the scope of mobility studies as of now.

4.7. Support Female Migration from Rural to Urban Areas

As research has shown, the minority of women (college graduates) who happen to move to urban areas experience high social mobility in contrast to women in rural areas. Despite this, access to opportunities of migration as well as education still remain limited for women. Hence, it is important to ensure that more women are able to have access to quality education, and are able to get support in moving to urban areas - areas that will ensure greater social mobility for them.

4.8 Education Sector Reforms

There needs to be an overall increase in public spending in the educational sector; World Bank data from 2013 suggests that India spends a meagre 3.8% of its GDP on Education, whereas Nepal and Bhutan spend 5.1% and 6.9% respectively. As this paper has shown, education continues to be an important determinant of social mobility. Lesser number of quality educational institutions implies a greater competition between individuals, wherein students with higher social capital or intergenerational wealth hold a clear advantage over marginalised sections. This trend reproduces socio-economic inequalities and limits the lower classes' access to quality education. To break free from this cycle, we need more quality institutions to provide equitable access to education to all individuals regardless of their social background.

4.9. Government Programmes for Transgender Citizens

Transgender people observe limited intragenerational mobility, and may even experience downward intergenerational mobility as many times they are abandoned, losing any possibility to inherit intergeneration wealth, social capital or their parents' socio-economic status. Even during their own lifetime, due to social stigma, they are excluded from most professional or educational opportunities and face rampant discrimination and violence. Invariably, these factors restrict their ability to move up the socio-economic ladder and act as a barrier to their access to opportunities equal to their cisgender counterparts. Hence, the government needs to introduce special programmes to ensure the greater inclusion of transgender people in educational institutions. Workspace discrimination against transgender employees should be penalised and trans employees should be provided with comprehensive healthcare, and the government should introduce vocational programmes to upskill transgender employees.

4.10. Government programmes for Muslims

Muslims have deteriorating intergenerational social mobility as compared to even the SCs and STs (Asher, Novosad, Rafkin, 2021). Hence, the government and civil society need to institute programmes into providing Muslims with increased access to education and employment. Apart from the assistance brought in by the Ministry of Minority Affairs in terms of scholarships, fellowships, concessional credits and minority skill development programs, Muslim Waqf Boards can also launch special programs of their own.

5.0 Conclusion

Through this study, we have concluded that despite the fact that overall standards of living have risen, and that many groups have been moved out of poverty, Indian society shows remarkable intergenerational stability at a macro level. This means that there is minimal upward mobility, implying that inequalities and hierarchies in Indian society have a tremendous propensity to reproduce, and there is a strong association between the origins of an individual - class and caste - and their eventual destinations. Yet, there are tremendous variations within sub-groups, and myriad factors influence how these groups experience mobilities. While caste still plays an important role in reproducing socio-economic inequities, SCs and STs have observed an overall increase in long-term intergenerational mobility due to government schemes, such as the reservations policy. On the contrary, there has been a consistent downfall in the mobility trends for Muslim men, implying that the access to socio-economic opportunity for Muslims has deteriorated. There are also sizable rural-urban differences across each determinant. Urban areas, with greater opportunities for work and better educational facilities, provide greater mobility as compared to rural areas. Furthermore, gender continues to affect how individuals experience mobility. While access to education for women is limited, in urban areas, college graduated women experience greater social mobility as compared to college graduated men. As expected, a complex interplay of gender, class of origin, caste, religion, education, and geography influences the nature of opportunities available to individuals. There is a need for government policy to take into account these regional and sectional inter-relationships between class, caste, gender, religion, and geography, and work towards increasing social mobility for marginalised and less mobile groups.

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