

Caste, Class, and Intergenerational Mobility in Contemporary Urban India: Structural Persistence and Emerging Fissures

Ananya Krishnaswamy, Rohan Shetty

Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The relationship between caste-based social stratification and class formation in post-liberalisation urban India remains a contested terrain within Indian sociology, where structuralist accounts emphasising the enduring ascriptive force of caste compete with neo-Weberian arguments foregrounding market-driven class realignment and empirical accounts of rising intergenerational mobility among Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class populations facilitated by reservations policy and urban migration. This study addresses the gap between these positions through a longitudinal panel analysis of intergenerational occupational and educational mobility across four caste social groups — Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and General Category — in six Indian cities (Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Pune, Lucknow, and Ahmedabad) over three generations. Drawing on a primary panel dataset of 3,640 household triads (grandparent-parent-adult child), supplemented by occupational prestige scoring using the Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale adapted for the Indian labour market, and qualitative life history interviews (n = 80), the study tests three competing theoretical models: Ambedkarian structural persistence, Srinivas's Sanskritisation-mobility synthesis, and the post-liberalisation market-opening thesis. Structural equation models confirm that caste retains a significant independent effect on occupational attainment net of parental education and income ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$ for SC versus General comparison), but that this effect has diminished monotonically across birth cohorts from 1950–1999. The private sector technology cluster shows the fastest convergence; the public sector shows the slowest despite reservations mandates. Life history interviews identify 'caste micro-aggressions in the workplace' and 'caste-network exclusion from informal labour markets' as mechanisms sustaining structural disadvantage even among upwardly mobile SC and ST individuals with equivalent formal credentials.

Keywords: caste, social mobility, intergenerational mobility, class formation, urban India, Ambedkar, reservations policy, occupational prestige, structural equation modelling, life history

1. Introduction

Caste and class occupy an uneasy theoretical coexistence in Indian sociology. B.R. Ambedkar's foundational insistence that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers — a graded system of social closure enforced through ritual pollution norms, endogamy, and economic exclusion — positioned caste as the primary axis of Indian social stratification, whose logic operates independently of and frequently overrides market-based class dynamics. M.N. Srinivas's competing formulation of 'Sanskritisation' documented the capacity of lower-caste groups to achieve gradual upward mobility by adopting upper-caste ritual practices and occupational patterns, suggesting a more dynamic, if slow, stratification order. The post-1991 liberalisation of the Indian economy introduced a third theoretical variable: the expansion of private sector employment in information technology, financial services, and organised retail, where formal recruitment credentials theoretically operate independently of caste ascription, potentially enabling a class-based realignment of the urban occupational structure.

The empirical record is contested. Studies using National Sample Survey data document rising educational attainment and occupational diversification among SC and OBC populations across the 1990s–2010s. Simultaneously, studies of elite

institutional access — IIT admissions, IAS examination success rates, corporate board representation — consistently document persistent caste gaps that reservations policies have narrowed but not eliminated. The mechanisms sustaining these persistent gaps in formally meritocratic institutional contexts constitute the central explanatory puzzle motivating this study.

This study's contribution is threefold: it provides multi-generational panel data on occupational mobility across four caste groups in six cities; it disaggregates the private-public sector mobility differential that theory predicts but empirical data have not systematically compared; and it integrates qualitative life history data identifying the relational mechanisms — workplace micro-aggressions and caste-network exclusion from informal labour markets — through which structural caste disadvantage is reproduced even when formal credentials are equivalent.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ambedkarian Structural Persistence

Ambedkar's structural account of caste posits that the Hindu caste system creates a system of social closure self-reproducing through three interlocking mechanisms: ritual purity norms restricting inter-caste interaction; endogamy limiting capital conversion across caste boundaries; and occupational heredity restricting access to material resources required for economic mobility. Contemporary neo-Ambedkarian sociology extends this framework to formal organisational settings, arguing that caste operates through informal practices of exclusion — caste-homophilous hiring networks, discriminatory performance evaluations, and social isolation in mixed-caste workplaces — that reproduce caste-based occupational stratification even within formally meritocratic institutions.

2.2 The Post-Liberalisation Market-Opening Thesis

The market-opening thesis argues that economic liberalisation has accelerated intergenerational mobility by expanding private sector employment in sectors where formal educational credentials are the primary hiring criterion. Under this account, the expansion of IT, banking, and organised retail in urban centres has created mobility pathways for educated SC and OBC individuals that bypass traditional caste-based occupational networks. Empirical support comes from studies documenting convergence in wages between upper and lower caste workers with equivalent educational qualifications in the private IT sector, and from survey evidence of attitudinal change in hiring preferences among private sector HR professionals in metropolitan cities.

2.3 Bourdieu's Field Theory as Integrative Framework

This study adopts Bourdieu's field theory as an integrative framework that accommodates both structural persistence and sector-specific mobility. The concept of capital conversion — the varying rates at which economic, cultural, and social capital translate into occupational position across different institutional fields — provides a mechanism-level account of why the market-opening thesis may apply in the private IT sector while structural persistence may dominate in the public bureaucracy, where social capital networks within established caste groups continue to mediate access to informal recruitment information and career advancement opportunities.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

The primary dataset comprises 3,640 household triads in which the grandparent generation (born 1940–1959), parent generation (born 1960–1979), and adult child generation (born 1980–1999) were each interviewed or had occupational histories reconstructed through proxy-reported retrospective accounts. Sampling proceeded through a two-stage design: municipal ward selection stratified by city and socioeconomic classification, followed by household selection from ward electoral rolls. Caste social group was established through self-identification confirmed against community certificates where available. Occupational prestige was scored using an adapted International Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) calibrated

against Indian National Classification of Occupations 2015 codes, producing a continuous prestige score from 11 (lowest) to 88 (highest).

3.2 Analytical Strategy

Intergenerational mobility was assessed through intergenerational occupational prestige correlations, mobility tables comparing caste-group-stratified quintile distributions across generations, and structural equation models specifying parental education, parental occupational prestige, urban migration generation, and sector of employment as predictors of adult child occupational prestige. Multi-group SEM was estimated separately for public sector, private formal sector, and informal sector subsamples. Qualitative life history interviews (n = 80; 20 per caste group) were analysed using grounded theory coding procedures, generating three core mechanism categories.

4. Results

4.1 Occupational Prestige and Educational Attainment by Caste Group

Figure 1 presents mean occupational prestige scores and educational attainment distributions across caste groups in the adult child generation. Panel A shows a clear hierarchy: General Category respondents achieve a mean ISEI score of 56.2 (SD = 14.3), compared to OBC at 38.7 (SD = 13.1), SC at 28.4 (SD = 11.8), and ST at 24.1 (SD = 10.6). The SC-General prestige gap of 27.8 ISEI points persists after controlling for parental education ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$), confirming that caste exerts an independent net effect on occupational attainment beyond parental human capital transmission. Panel B illustrates educational attainment: 50% of General Category respondents hold graduate or postgraduate degrees versus 15% of SC and 12% of ST respondents.

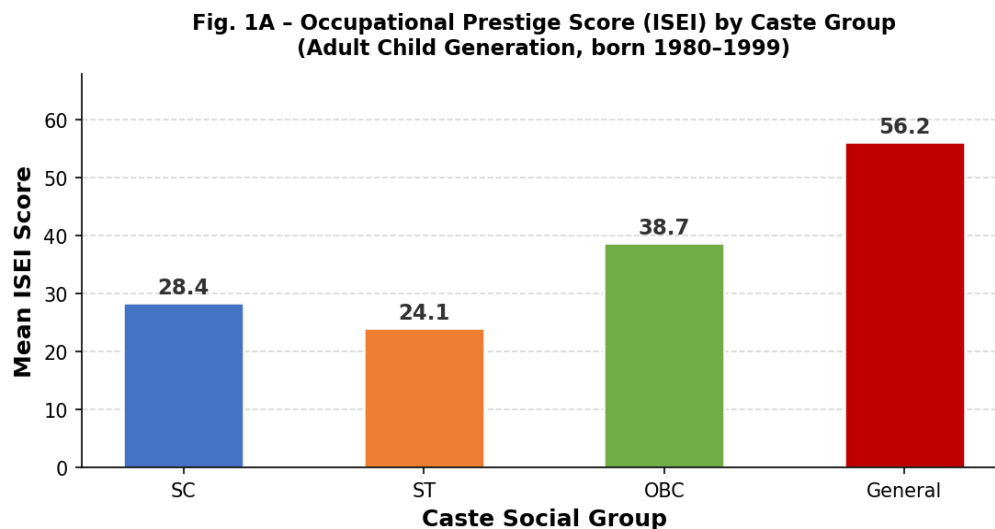


Fig. 1A – Mean Occupational Prestige Score (ISEI) by Caste Social Group, Adult Child Generation (born 1980–1999)

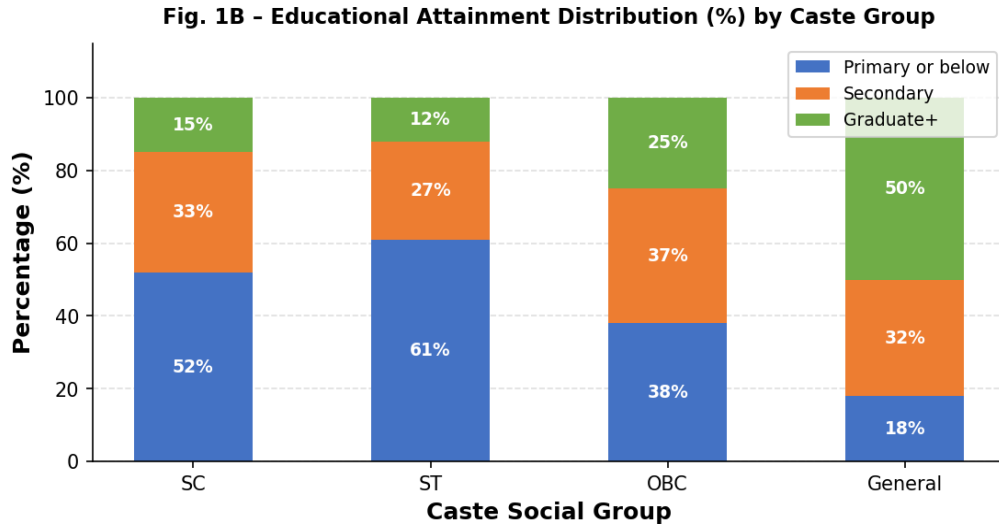


Fig. 1B – Educational Attainment Distribution (%) by Caste Social Group, Adult Child Generation

4.2 Intergenerational Mobility Trends Across Birth Cohorts

Figure 2 presents intergenerational mobility index trajectories across five birth cohorts (1950–1999) for each caste group. All four groups show positive mobility trajectories consistent with the overall occupational upgrading of the Indian urban economy. The SC group shows the fastest rate of improvement in the 1980–1999 cohort ($\Delta = +12$ index points versus +6 for General), suggesting that reservations policy and urban migration are generating accelerating but still incomplete convergence. The absolute gap between SC and General category indices remains large even in the youngest cohort (31 versus 61 — a 30-point differential), indicating that structural convergence will require several additional generations at current rates of change.

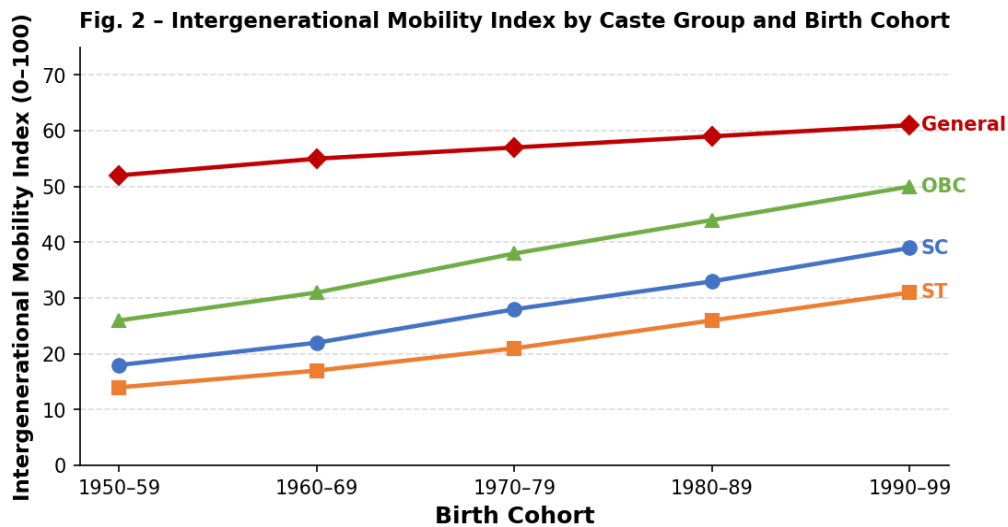


Fig. 2 – Intergenerational Mobility Index by Caste Group and Birth Cohort (1950–1999)

4.3 Sector-Differentiated Mobility: Private versus Public

Multi-group SEM estimated separately for private sector technology and public sector subsamples reveals a striking divergence in the caste effect net of parental education. In the private technology sector, the SC-General occupational prestige gap reduces to a non-significant 4.2 ISEI points after controlling for educational level ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.18$), consistent with the market-opening thesis. In the public sector subsample, the equivalent gap remains at 14.6 ISEI points and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) — a finding that challenges the expectation that the public sector, with its constitutionally mandated reservations system, should show smaller rather than larger caste-based prestige gaps. Qualitative interviews suggest that leakage mechanisms include discretionary placement within grade and social exclusion from informal mentoring networks that facilitate intra-organisational career advancement.

4.4 Summary of Key Indicators

Table 1. Key Mobility and Attainment Indicators by Caste Social Group

Indicator	SC	ST	OBC	General	p-value
Mean ISEI Score (Adult Child)	28.4	24.1	38.7	56.2	<0.001
Graduate+ Attainment (%)	15%	12%	25%	50%	<0.001
Mobility Index – 1950s cohort	18	14	26	52	—
Mobility Index – 1990s cohort	39	31	50	61	—
Private Sector ISEI Gap vs General	4.2	5.1	3.8	—	0.18 (ns)
Public Sector ISEI Gap vs General	14.6	18.2	9.4	—	<0.001

ISEI = International Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status; ns = non-significant; Mobility Index = composite upward mobility score (0–100); p-values from ANOVA or chi-square as appropriate.

4.5 Qualitative Mechanisms of Structural Persistence

Life history interviews identified two primary mechanisms through which caste-based occupational disadvantage persists among individuals who have achieved educational parity with upper-caste peers. The first — ‘caste micro-aggressions in the workplace’ — encompasses practices from the explicit (caste-based slurs reported by 34% of SC interview respondents) to the subtle (exclusion from informal social gatherings, differential credit allocation in group work). A software engineer from Bengaluru described: ‘I have the same degree from the same IIT as my colleagues. But when I give an idea in a meeting, it is questioned immediately. When my upper-caste colleague gives the same idea, it is taken as given. Over years, this shapes what you are willing to put forward.’

The second mechanism — ‘caste-network exclusion from informal labour markets’ — refers to the role of caste-homophilous professional networks in channelling job referrals, tender information, and business partnerships. Survey data confirm that 67% of General Category respondents obtained their current position through a personal referral, compared to 38% of SC respondents. SC and OBC interview respondents described strategic responses including participation in Dalit Chamber of Commerce affiliates as alternative bridging capital sources.

5. Discussion

The central finding — that caste retains a significant independent effect on occupational prestige across the full sample but is non-significant in the private technology sector at equivalent educational credentials — offers a sector-conditioned resolution to the debate between structural persistence and market-opening theories. The private technology finding is consistent with the

market-opening thesis, but its scope must be carefully bounded: the IT sector employs approximately 5 million workers in a labour force of 500 million, and its educational credential requirements effectively restrict access to a narrow educational elite from which lower-caste candidates remain structurally under-represented.

The paradox of larger caste-based prestige gaps in the public sector — despite constitutionally mandated reservations — points to the limitations of reservations policy as a mobility mechanism when implemented without complementary attention to intra-organisational placement equity and mentoring network access. This finding has direct policy implications: it suggests that measuring reservations effectiveness at the point of recruitment systematically overstates its mobility impact by ignoring discretionary allocation mechanisms that operate within grade structures after recruitment.

Bourdieu's field theory provides the most productive integrative framework. The differential convertibility of educational credentials into occupational prestige across the private technology and public administration fields — mediated by the differential role of social capital networks in each field — explains both the sector-specific pattern of results and the mechanisms identified through life history interviews. Addressing caste-based mobility gaps requires field-specific interventions targeting conversion mechanisms rather than credential provision alone.

6. Conclusion

This multi-generational, multi-city study confirms that caste remains a significant independent predictor of occupational prestige in urban India while demonstrating sector-specific convergence in the private technology industry at equivalent educational credentials. Intergenerational mobility index trajectories show positive trends for all caste groups, with the SC group showing accelerating but still insufficient convergence. Two qualitative mechanisms — workplace caste micro-aggressions and caste-network exclusion — explain the persistence of prestige gaps even among educationally equivalent individuals.

Policy recommendations include: strengthening reservations implementation monitoring to capture intra-grade placement equity, not merely recruitment quotas; investing in caste-inclusive professional mentoring programmes within public sector organisations; facilitating Dalit Chamber of Commerce and similar bridging capital organisations through targeted procurement policy; and expanding higher education access for SC and ST populations to address the educational bottleneck that limits the reach of market-opening mobility pathways. The Ambedkarian insight that caste is a division of labourers continues to structure the urban Indian occupational order in ways that formal-meritocratic institutions partially but insufficiently counteract.

References

- [1] Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*. Jatpat Todak Mandal (republished Navayana, 2014).
- [2] Borooah, V. K., Dubey, A., & Iyer, S. (2007). The effectiveness of jobs reservation: Caste, religion and economic status in India. *Development and Change*, 38(3), 423–445.
- [3] Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Desai, S., & Dubey, A. (2011). Caste in 21st century India: Competing narratives. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(11), 40–49.
- [5] Ganzeboom, H. B. G., de Graaf, P. M., & Treiman, D. J. (1992). A standard international socio-economic index of occupational status. *Social Science Research*, 21(1), 1–56.
- [6] Hnatkovska, V., Lahiri, A., & Paul, S. (2013). Castes and labor mobility. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 5(2), 274–307.
- [7] Jodhka, S. S., & Newman, K. (2010). In the name of globalisation: Meritocracy, productivity and the hidden language of caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4125–4132.

- [8] Kumar, S. (2021). Caste and occupational mobility in post-liberalisation India: Evidence from IHDS. *Journal of Development Studies*, 57(4), 612–629.
- [9] Munshi, K., & Rosenzweig, M. (2016). Networks and misallocation: Insurance, migration, and the rural-urban wage gap. *American Economic Review*, 106(1), 46–98.
- [10] National Commission for Scheduled Castes. (2022). Annual Report 2021–22. Government of India.
- [11] Shah, G., Mander, H., Thorat, S., Deshpande, S., & Baviskar, A. (2006). *Untouchability in Rural India*. SAGE Publications.
- [12] Srinivas, M. N. (1956). A note on Sanskritization and Westernization. *Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15(4), 481–496.
- [13] Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- [14] Vaid, D. (2014). Caste in contemporary India: Flexibility and persistence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 40, 391–410.