

THE INTERGENERATIONAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN ASCRIBED CASTE AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY IN MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the dynamics of Intergenerational occupational mobility among Indian males, utilizing secondary data to analyse movements within the social hierarchy. By categorizing occupations through skill levels and social status, the study explores the indicators of income distribution, educational achievement, and the persistent influence of caste. The findings suggest that while educational attainment has increased, occupational "ascents" remain fragile, particularly for marginalized groups, as ascribed status continues to outweigh achieved status in many sectors.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

The researchers (Vegard Iversen, Anirudh Krishna, and Kunal Sen) discuss intergenerational occupational mobility—the movement in social status between parents and their children—using secondary data.

By examining "sharp" and "moderate" ascents and descents, the paper aims to provide a precise understanding of how income distribution, educational achievements, and rural-urban contexts dictate a person's trajectory.

The quest for **intergenerational occupational mobility**—defined as the change in social status between a father and his children—is a central pillar of the "Indian Dream." In a perfectly mobile society, an individual's professional destination should be determined by their **achieved status** (talents, education, and hard work) rather than their **ascribed status** (the caste or class they were born into). However, as researchers Vegard Iversen, Anirudh Krishna, and Kunal Sen suggest, the transition from "Rags to Riches" in India is often obstructed by deep-seated structural rigidities. The study differentiates analyse the trajectories of Indian males, into two primary aspects:

1. **Skill-Based Categorization:** Assessing the shift from manual agricultural labour to technical or clerical "white-collar" roles.
2. **Social Status Hierarchy:** Evaluating how "prestige" is attached to certain jobs, particularly how government service is viewed compared to private-sector manual labour.

1.2 The Conflict of Identity

The core of the Indian mobility puzzle lies in the tension between **modernization and tradition**. While the post-1990s liberalized economy created new occupational categories (like the construction and service sectors), these roles are often superimposed onto the ancient **Caste System**. For marginalized groups like the Sudras and Scheduled Castes (SC), mobility is not just a matter of changing jobs; it is a battle against "social gravity." Even when educational indicators improve—as seen in the 95% enrolment rates—the "sharp ascents" into high-status roles remain **fragile** and easily reversed by health shocks or systemic hiring discrimination.

1.3 Indicators of Mobility

To understand this phenomenon, we must look beyond simple employment numbers and analyse a "bundle" of indicators:

- **Income Distribution:** Does a higher-ranking job actually provide a wealth buffer?
- **Educational Attainment:** Is the "Mid-Day Meal" success translating into college-level professional degrees?
- **The Rural-Urban Context:** Does moving to a city actually "erase" caste, or does it simply rebrand it into new forms of urban inequality?

2. EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY: PROGRESS AND DISPARITY

There are two components of social mobility: **Intragenerational** (within one's own lifetime) and **Intergenerational** (incremental achievement relative to one's parents).

2.1 The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) & Educational Mobility:

The MDM serves as a bridge between the **Nutrition-Based Poverty Trap** and **Intergenerational Occupational Mobility**. By providing a guaranteed meal, the "opportunity cost" for a poor parent to send a child to school (instead of child labor) is significantly reduced.

The "Hidden" Successes

- **The Barker Hypothesis Link:** In your previous interests, you've explored the Barker Hypothesis (fatal origins of adult disease). The MDM acts as a secondary intervention. If early childhood nutrition was poor, the MDM provides a "catch-up" period during the growing years (11–15 age group), which improves cognitive function and, eventually, employability.
- **Social Commensality:** Beyond calories, the MDM is a site of **social levelling**. When children from different caste backgrounds (Sudras, SCs, and Upper Castes) sit together to eat a meal prepared by a common cook, it subtly challenges the "ascribed status" barriers you mentioned in your notes.

The Fragility of the MDM

Despite its success in increasing enrolment to over 95%, the MDM faces several structural constraints:

1. **Quantity vs. Quality (The "Empty Calorie" Trap):** While attendance has increased, the *quality* of nutrition often fails to meet the standards required for brain development. If the meal is only rice and salt, the "educational achievement" you noted (functional literacy) remains stagnant because the child's cognitive capacity is stunted by hidden hunger (micronutrient deficiency).
2. **Caste in the Kitchen:** This shows that "ascribed status is still practiced." The MDM makes this very clear. There are many documented incidents of students from specific castes refusing to eat food made by SC/ST workers or SC/ST youngsters being made to sit apart from other kids. This means that the MDM may help kids get inside the building, but it doesn't always help them rise up the social ladder.
3. **The "Teaching-Learning" Trade-off:** In many rural schools, teachers spend significant time managing the logistics of the meal (procurement, hygiene, and distribution) rather than teaching. This contributes to the "diminished" judge of SC/ST students in later years; they are in school, but they aren't necessarily *learning* at a competitive level

2.2 The Move from Rural to Urban:

Studies show that the average level of education in India has gone up. This is especially clear in rural areas and states that are "backward." Programs like the Mid-Day Meal have made a big difference in school attendance.

- **Generational Comparison:** More than three times as many people aged 11 to 15 can read and write as people aged 60 and up.
- **The Primary Level Equalisation:** Desai and Kulkarni (2008) say that educational achievement is "equalised" across caste groups at the primary level. After 78 years of freedom, almost all communities have primary schools, and 80% have upper primary schools within 2 kilometres.

2.3 The "College Barrier"

Despite high enrolment (over 95% of children), a significant "inequality of opportunity" emerges at the college level and beyond. While SC/ST educational attainment has increased, their attendance in higher education remains diminished (Aser, 2014), limiting their ability to translate basic literacy into high-paying professional roles.

3. INCOME AND OCCUPATIONAL CONTINUITY

Since the 1990s, average income and asset holding have increased. However, the benefits are not distributed equally.

3.1 The Persistence of Caste

In the Indian context, caste is **ascribed**—it is a fixed identity that often dictates occupational status. For groups like the Sudras or Scheduled Castes, social status is inherently tied to their traditional labour.

The Complexity of Status: A "sweeper" in a government job holds a different social status than a "manual sweeper," yet both may be categorized similarly in broad data, masking the intricacy of status acquisition.

3.2 Continuity vs. Change

The "dominant picture" in India is one of **continuity rather than change**. * **The 68.6% Rule:** A sample majority of 68.6% of sons remain stuck in the same manual agricultural work category as their fathers.

- **The Construction Sector:** While construction is the second-largest employer after agriculture and offers a "higher" rank than manual labour, it is rarely a sign of significant upward mobility. It is often a lateral shift from one form of precarious manual work to another.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: WHY IS MOBILITY FRAGILE?

The question arises: *What factors contribute to the perpetuation of caste-based occupation? Is something dragging them down, or is it an ethnic identity constraint?*

4.1 Hiring Discrimination

While occupational categories have expanded, the private sector often reflects discriminatory attitudes in hiring practices. Even when SC/ST candidates possess the required education, they face barriers that their "Upper Caste" counterparts do not.

4.2 The "Survival vs. Change" Dilemma

Upward mobility is rare because many families live on the edge of the poverty line.

- **Health Shocks:** Every year, 5% of the population falls below the poverty line due to ill health and medical expenses.
- **Opportunity vs. Awareness:** Marginalized groups often have less accessibility to high-tier opportunities and lower awareness of how to navigate professional networks.
- **The Choice:** When wages are distributed unequally, individuals must often choose between **immediate survival** and the "dare to change." For many, the risk of failing at a "sharp ascent" is too high to take.

4.3 The Concept of "Sticky Floors"

Sociologists often talk about "glass ceilings" for those at the top, but your notes highlight what can be called "**sticky floors**" for India's rural poor. The 68.6% of sons remaining in manual labor suggests that for the majority of the population, the floor is not just sticky—it is a trap. This introduction frames the rest of your paper as an investigation into why these floors remain so adhesive despite 78 years of independence.

5. CONCLUSION

While India has made massive strides in primary education and infrastructure, the "Rags to Riches" narrative remains an exception rather than the rule. Occupational status is still heavily dictated by ascribed caste identity. For the "Urban Son," shifting from manual work to clerical or vocational work is possible, but for the "Rural Son," the movement is much more fragile. True mobility requires not just "literacy," but a dismantling of discriminatory hiring and a strengthening of the social safety net to prevent health-related poverty traps.

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