



Caste, Class, and Aspiration: Intergenerational Mobility Among First-Generation College Graduates in Central India

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Abstract

Higher education has long been positioned as a principal mechanism of social mobility in post-independence India, particularly for historically marginalised caste groups. This study examines the intergenerational mobility experiences of first-generation college graduates in urban centres of Madhya Pradesh, with attention to how caste and class jointly shape access to, and returns from, higher education. Using a survey of 350 first-generation graduates stratified by caste category (General, OBC, SC, and ST), the study measures occupational mobility relative to parental occupation, subjective class mobility, and aspirational orientation. Findings show that while first-generation graduation is associated with measurable occupational upgrading across all caste categories, the magnitude of mobility differs significantly by caste, with SC and ST graduates experiencing smaller occupational gains and greater reported discrimination in the labour market than their General and OBC counterparts. Regression analysis identifies caste category, father's occupational category, and access to reservation benefits as significant predictors of occupational mobility. The paper argues that educational expansion has produced 'bounded mobility' for historically disadvantaged groups — real but constrained gains that fall short of eliminating caste-based stratification. Policy implications for equity in higher education and employment are discussed.

Keywords: caste, social mobility, first-generation graduates, higher education, class, Madhya Pradesh

1. Introduction

The expansion of higher education in India since independence has been accompanied by an enduring policy commitment to using education as an instrument of social justice, most visibly through the constitutional reservation system for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and, since 1990, Other Backward Classes (OBC) (Deshpande, 2013). A growing proportion of students from these categories are now the first in their families to attain a college degree. Yet whether this educational attainment translates into commensurate occupational and class mobility remains a contested empirical question. Classical mobility studies conducted in Western contexts (Blau & Duncan, 1967) treat education as a relatively caste- or race-neutral mobility channel; Indian sociological scholarship, by contrast, has long argued that caste operates as an independent stratifying force that persists alongside, and interacts with, class and educational credentials (Beteille, 1996; Deshpande, 2011).

This study contributes to this debate by empirically examining the mobility trajectories of first-generation college graduates from different caste backgrounds in the urban centres of



Madhya Pradesh. It asks: does first-generation graduation produce equivalent occupational mobility across caste groups, or does caste continue to condition the returns to education even after formal credentials are held constant?

2. Literature Review

The sociology of social mobility distinguishes between absolute mobility — the extent to which individuals attain higher occupational status than their parents in an expanding economy — and relative mobility, which measures whether the association between origin and destination class weakens across generations (Goldthorpe, 1980). Blau and Duncan's (1967) status attainment model established education as the principal mediating mechanism linking family background to occupational outcomes, a framework subsequently applied, with modifications, to the Indian context.

Indian sociologists have consistently emphasised that caste cannot be reduced to a proxy for class. Beteille (1996) argued that although the traditional caste order has weakened under processes of Sanskritisation, urbanisation, and secularisation, caste continues to structure access to social and cultural capital in ways that are irreducible to economic class alone. Deshpande (2011, 2013) demonstrates empirically that SC/ST households remain concentrated in lower-return segments of the education and labour markets even after controlling for household income, attributing this to persistent social network effects, discrimination in hiring, and unequal access to English-medium and elite educational institutions.

Studies of reservation policy outcomes present a mixed picture. Jodhka and Newman (2007) document continuing discriminatory practices in urban private-sector hiring despite formal qualification parity between candidates of different caste backgrounds. Conversely, other scholarship points to measurable gains in SC/ST representation in public sector employment and higher education enrolment as evidence of reservation policy efficacy (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The concept of 'bounded mobility' — real but constrained upward movement that does not fully close intergroup gaps — has been used to characterise these mixed outcomes (Jeffrey et al., 2008), and provides the conceptual anchor for the present study.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To measure occupational mobility among first-generation college graduates relative to parental occupation across caste categories.
2. To examine caste-based variation in subjective class mobility and perceived labour market discrimination.
3. To identify predictors of occupational mobility among first-generation graduates.

3.1 Hypotheses

H1: Occupational mobility scores differ significantly across caste categories.

H2: SC/ST respondents report significantly higher perceived labour market discrimination than General/OBC respondents.

H3: Caste category remains a significant predictor of occupational mobility even after controlling for father's occupation and education stream.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: A cross-sectional comparative survey design was used to assess mobility outcomes across caste categories.

Sample: 350 first-generation college graduates (aged 24–40, currently employed) were selected from urban centres of Madhya Pradesh using purposive and snowball sampling, stratified to ensure adequate representation across General, OBC, SC, and ST categories.

Tools: A structured schedule captured parental and respondent occupational category (coded using a modified NSSO occupational classification), a 10-item Subjective Class Mobility Scale, and an 8-item Perceived Discrimination Scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.79).

Data Analysis: One-way ANOVA, chi-square tests, and hierarchical multiple regression were used in SPSS (v.26). All data presented are hypothetical, constructed for methodological demonstration.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Caste Category and Gender (N = 350)

Caste Category	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
General	48	42	90	25.7
OBC	58	52	110	31.4
SC	42	38	80	22.9
ST	38	32	70	20.0

Table 2: Mean Occupational Mobility Score by Caste Category

Caste Category	N	Mean Mobility Score	SD
General	90	3.42	0.81
OBC	110	3.10	0.85
SC	80	2.58	0.92
ST	70	2.41	0.95

ANOVA: $F(3, 346) = 28.74, p < 0.001$

Table 3: Perceived Labour Market Discrimination by Caste Category

Caste Category	Low Discrimination (%)	Moderate Discrimination (%)	High Discrimination (%)
General	62.2	28.9	8.9
OBC	44.5	37.3	18.2

Caste Category	Low Discrimination (%)	Moderate Discrimination (%)	High Discrimination (%)
SC	21.3	38.7	40.0
ST	18.6	35.7	45.7

$\chi^2 (6, N=350) = 87.35, p < 0.001$

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Occupational Mobility Score

Predictor	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)
Father's Occupational Category	0.38*	0.29*
Education Stream (Professional=1)	0.24*	0.19*
Caste Category (SC/ST=1)	-	-0.31*
Reservation Benefit Utilised (Yes=1)	-	0.16*
R ²	0.21	0.33
ΔR^2	-	0.12*

*p < 0.05

Table 2 confirms significant caste-based variation in occupational mobility scores, with General category graduates reporting the highest mean mobility and ST graduates the lowest, supporting H1. Table 3 shows a pronounced gradient in perceived labour market discrimination, with over 85% of ST respondents and nearly 79% of SC respondents reporting moderate to high discrimination, compared to under 38% of General category respondents, supporting H2. The hierarchical regression in Table 4 shows that caste category remains a significant negative predictor of occupational mobility even after controlling for father's occupational category and education stream, with the addition of caste-related variables producing a significant increment in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.12, p < 0.05$), supporting H3.

6. Discussion

The findings provide empirical support for the 'bounded mobility' thesis (Jeffrey et al., 2008): first-generation graduation is associated with real occupational upgrading across all caste categories relative to parental occupation, yet the magnitude of this upgrading is systematically smaller for SC and ST graduates. This pattern is consistent with Deshpande's (2011) argument that caste operates as an independent stratifying mechanism that persists after formal educational parity is achieved. The markedly higher perceived discrimination reported by SC and ST respondents further corroborates qualitative findings from Jodhka and Newman (2007) regarding continuing caste-based bias in urban labour markets, particularly in private-sector recruitment.



The significant positive coefficient for reservation benefit utilisation in the full regression model suggests that affirmative action policy continues to provide a meaningful, if partial, counterweight to these disadvantages, lending some support to the more optimistic assessments of reservation efficacy offered by Thorat and Newman (2010). Taken together, the results suggest that higher education functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for closing caste-based mobility gaps in contemporary urban India.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that first-generation college graduation is associated with significant occupational mobility for respondents across all caste categories, but that caste continues to exert an independent, constraining effect on the magnitude of this mobility, particularly for SC and ST graduates. Policy interventions should extend beyond access-oriented measures such as reservation in admissions to include placement support, anti-discrimination enforcement in private-sector hiring, and mentorship programmes specifically targeted at first-generation SC/ST graduates entering the labour market.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The reliance on retrospective self-report of parental occupation may introduce recall bias, and the urban, Madhya Pradesh-specific sample limits generalisability to rural or other regional labour markets. Future longitudinal research tracking graduates from enrolment through employment would strengthen causal inference regarding the mobility-generating role of higher education.

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