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Caste, Class, and Opportunity: A Sociological Study of Structural Inequality in Contemporary Indian Society

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Abstract
This paper examines how caste and class together produce structural inequality in contemporary Indian society and how this inequality shapes access to opportunity and social mobility. Drawing on Marxian, Weberian and Ambedkarite perspectives, it synthesises peer-reviewed scholarship, government data and civil society. The analysis shows that caste and class overlap strongly but not completely: marginalised groups are concentrated among the landless, informal and low-wage workforce, yet caste disadvantage persists even after education and occupation are considered. Consistent disparities appear in education, employment, healthcare and digital access, and they are reproduced through networks, credentials and inherited assets that are often presented as merit. Constitutional safeguards, reservation and welfare programmes have widened participation and created a visible middle class among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, but their reach is limited by the shrinking public sector, uneven implementation and weak coverage of private markets. The paper argues that sustained social mobility requires addressing economic and social barriers together, through investment in public services, measures against discrimination in private markets and early-stage support for disadvantaged children.

Keywords: caste, class, structural inequality, social mobility, reservation, India

1. Introduction

Inequality in India is not only a matter of unequal incomes; it is a matter of unequal starting points. Seven decades after independence, a person's caste, together with the economic class into which they are born, still shapes the school they attend, the job they can reach, the hospital that will treat them and the networks that will vouch for them. India is among the fastest-growing large economies in the world, yet its growth has been accompanied by persistent and in some respects widening disparities (Chancel & Piketty, 2019). The central puzzle that motivates this study is why a society with a constitution committed to equality, a long record of affirmative action and a rapidly expanding market economy continues to reproduce hierarchy across generations.

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Sociologists have long argued that the answer lies in the structure of society rather than in the abilities or choices of individuals. Structural inequality refers to patterned, durable and institutionally embedded disadvantages that operate regardless of the intentions of particular actors. In India, such structures are rooted in the caste system but are continually reshaped by markets, the state and changing technologies. Mosse (2018) describes caste as a structure of discrimination and advantage that adapts to development rather than disappearing with it, and this insight guides the present analysis.

1.1 Concept of Caste, Class and Social Inequality

Caste is a hereditary system of social ranking in which membership is determined by birth, status is ritually graded, and interaction, marriage and occupation have traditionally been regulated by norms of purity and pollution. Two terms are often distinguished: varna, the fourfold scriptural classification, and jati, the thousands of endogamous local groups that form the lived reality of caste. Jodhka (2012) stresses that caste is neither a purely religious relic nor a purely economic category; it is a social institution that combines status, power and access to resources.

Class, in contrast, refers to a position within the economic order, defined by ownership of property, control over production, skills, income and wealth. Sociologists treat class as achievable, at least in principle, whereas caste is ascribed. Social inequality is the broader condition in which individuals and groups have unequal access to valued resources and rewards. It has several overlapping dimensions: economic (income and wealth), social (status and recognition), political (voice and representation) and cultural (language, taste and educational capital).

A useful way to hold these ideas together is the notion of ascriptive hierarchy. Jodhka (2015) shows that caste continues to operate as an ascriptive principle even where formal institutions are modern and impersonal, because social capital, family resources and informal networks carry caste advantage into new settings. In this study, "structural inequality" is therefore used to mean the combined effect of caste hierarchy and class differentiation on the distribution of life chances.

1.2 Historical Evolution of the Caste System in India

The origins of caste are debated. Classical Brahmanical texts present the varna order as a divinely sanctioned division of labour, while modern historians emphasise the role of political authority, agrarian settlement and religious ideology in hardening these divisions over centuries. What is generally agreed is that, by the medieval period, jati-based hierarchy had become an organising principle of village life, with groups at the bottom, later called Dalits, excluded from land, ritual space and common resources and burdened with stigmatised labour.

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Colonial rule transformed caste in important ways. Census enumeration, which classified and ranked communities, and colonial land-revenue and legal systems turned fluid identities into more rigid administrative categories. At the same time, colonial education and urbanisation opened limited spaces for lower-caste assertion. The anti-caste movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, associated with figures such as Jotirao Phule, Periyar and B. R. Ambedkar, framed caste as a system of graded inequality that required political and social, not merely moral, remedies (Ambedkar, 2014; Rao, 2020).

After independence, the Constitution abolished untouchability and guaranteed equality before the law, and the state adopted a programme of protective discrimination. Land reforms, planned industrialisation and the Green Revolution altered rural class structures, while the Mandal Commission's implementation in the 1990s expanded reservations to Other Backward Classes and re-politicised caste. Economic liberalisation after 1991 created new markets and professions, but, as later sections show, it did not dissolve older hierarchies. Instead, caste has been "modernised", becoming a resource in electoral competition, business networks and credentialled labour markets (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2018).

1.3 Relationship Between Caste and Class in Indian Society

The relationship between caste and class is one of the oldest debates in Indian sociology. One position holds that caste is an ideological superstructure that masks underlying class exploitation. Another treats caste as an autonomous system of status that cannot be reduced to economics. The evidence suggests that both claims are partly right. Caste and class overlap strongly, so that upper castes are disproportionately found among the propertied and professional classes and Scheduled Castes among landless labourers and informal workers, but the overlap is far from perfect, and caste disadvantage persists even among those with comparable education and income (A. Deshpande, 2011; Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

This imperfect overlap is what makes the topic analytically important. If class alone explained disadvantage, economic growth and education would gradually erase caste gaps. If caste alone explained it, class mobility would have no effect. The reality is an interaction in which caste shapes the entry conditions into class positions, and class in turn shapes how caste advantage or disadvantage is converted into opportunity. The remainder of this paper develops this argument through literature, theory and an analysis of patterns across key domains of life.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Sociological Perspectives on Caste and Class

Scholarship on caste has moved through several phases. Early structural-functionalist and Indological accounts treated caste as a cultural system of ranked purity. Later work, informed by political economy, stressed land, labour and power. Contemporary research increasingly treats

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caste as a dynamic structure that is reproduced through institutions such as schools, labour markets and political parties. Desai and Dubey (2011) capture this shift by contrasting two competing narratives: one in which caste is fading under the pressure of urbanisation and education, and another in which it is merely changing form. Their analysis of national survey data shows that caste remains a strong predictor of educational attainment, occupation, poverty and household assets, which supports the second narrative.

S. Deshpande (2013) adds an important observation about how caste is seen. The upper-caste "general category" has become, in public discourse, a seemingly caste-less category, so that caste is spoken of as a problem of the marginalised rather than as a system from which dominant groups also benefit. This "castelessness" is itself a mechanism of privilege because it makes advantage appear to be merit. Jodhka (2012) similarly argues that caste can no longer be understood only through village ethnography; it must be studied in cities, firms, universities and digital spaces.

The class dimension has been strengthened by recent work on development. Mosse (2018) reviews evidence from several fields and concludes that caste operates through three linked processes: economic exclusion, cultural and ritual stigma, and political mobilisation. These processes reproduce inequality even when overt, legally prohibited discrimination declines. This view moves the debate from whether caste or class matters to how they combine.

2.2 Caste-Based Stratification and Social Hierarchy

A large body of empirical work documents caste-based stratification. A. Deshpande (2011), in The Grammar of Caste, uses national data to show that the economic distance between caste groups is substantial and that part of the gap cannot be explained by differences in education or experience. She argues that the unexplained component is a plausible indicator of discrimination and of unequal access to networks and capital. Thorat and Neuman (2012) reach a consistent conclusion using field experiments and labour-market data: otherwise identical job applicants with names signalling Dalit or Muslim identity are less likely to be called for interviews than applicants with upper-caste names.

Stratification also operates through social closure. Endogamy, residential segregation and caste-based associations restrict the circulation of information, credit and jobs. Jodhka (2015) shows that even entrepreneurs from historically disadvantaged groups encounter barriers when trying to enter business networks controlled by dominant castes. Teltumbde (2018) goes further, arguing that neoliberal policies and majoritarian politics have intensified caste violence while simultaneously weakening the institutional means of resisting it. Whatever one makes of the strength of that claim, the empirical record of persistent atrocities and exclusion supports the broader point that hierarchy has not been dismantled.

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Rao (2020) offers a historical and political lens, showing that the "caste question" has been continuously reframed in modern India as a question of citizenship, welfare and dignity. Her work reminds us that stratification is not only about material deprivation but also about

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Structural Inequality

Three traditions inform this study. The first, associated with Karl Marx, locates inequality in the relations of production. The second, associated with Max Weber, distinguishes class, status and power as separate but interacting sources of stratification. The third, developed by B. R. Ambedkar, treats caste as a system of graded inequality that requires the annihilation of its social and ideological foundations. No single perspective is sufficient. Taken together, they provide a three-sided frame: material position (Marx), social honour and organisation (Weber) and an indigenous critique of hierarchy and a programme for justice (Ambedkar).

3.2 Marxist Perspective on Class and Economic Inequality

In the Marxian tradition, society is divided by ownership of the means of production. Those who own capital and land extract surplus from those who sell their labour, and this relationship generates conflict and shapes culture, law and ideology (Marx & Engels, 2012). Applied to India, a Marxist reading emphasises the concentration of land and capital, the large informal workforce and the use of caste as a means of disciplining and cheapening labour. Stigmatised occupations such as manual scavenging, leather work and agricultural bondage illustrate how caste can supply a ready-made hierarchy of labour that employers exploit.

The limits of a purely class-based reading are well known. Early Marxist analysis in India was criticised for treating caste as a secondary or transitional phenomenon that would disappear with economic development. The evidence reviewed in this paper contradicts that expectation. Nevertheless, the Marxist perspective remains valuable because it explains why economic growth can raise average incomes while leaving the structure of ownership, and therefore of bargaining power, largely unchanged (Chancel & Piketty, 2019).

3.3 Weberian Perspective on Status, Power and Class

Weber (2019) argued that stratification has three dimensions: class (market position), status (social honour and lifestyle) and party (organised power). A group may be advantaged in one dimension and not in others, and the dimensions can reinforce one another. Caste is for Weber the clearest example of a status order, in which honour is fixed by birth and enforced through restrictions on commensality and marriage. This makes the Weberian perspective particularly suited to understanding why a wealthy Dalit entrepreneur may still face social exclusion, while a modestly placed upper-caste person may retain social prestige.

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Weber also directs attention to "social closure", the process by which groups monopolise opportunities by excluding outsiders. Subramanian (2019) uses this idea in her study of engineering education, showing how upper-caste groups have converted historical advantages into credentials and then reframed those credentials as merit. The Weberian lens therefore helps to explain how caste operates within ostensibly impersonal institutions such as examinations and recruitment boards.

3.4 Ambedkar's Perspective on Caste and Social Justice

Ambedkar's contribution is central to any sociology of Indian inequality. In Annihilation of Caste, he argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, a hierarchy in which occupations and persons are ranked and in which the ranking is fixed by birth, thereby denying individuals the freedom to choose their work (Ambedkar, 2014). He described caste as a system of "graded inequality", one in which each group has a stake in maintaining the disadvantages of those below it, which explains why it has been so resistant to change.

Ambedkar rejected the view that economic reform alone would end caste. He insisted that political democracy would remain fragile without social and economic democracy, and he saw education, representation and legal safeguards as indispensable instruments of emancipation. His thought directly informed the Constitution's provisions on equality, abolition of untouchability and special measures for Scheduled Castes (Rao, 2020). For the present study, his perspective supplies both a diagnosis (caste as a self-reinforcing structure of hierarchy) and a normative standard (the realisation of liberty, equality and fraternity) against which contemporary policy can be assessed.

4. Caste, Class and Patterns of Structural Inequality in India

Contemporary caste is best understood as a layered structure rather than a single ladder. At the top are the "forward" or general-category castes, historically associated with ritual authority, landownership and literacy. In the middle are dominant peasant and trading castes and the Other Backward Classes, a heterogeneous category that includes both politically assertive landholding groups and very poor artisan and service communities. At the bottom are the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), who face the heaviest burdens of exclusion and violence. Desai and Dubey (2011) show that these categories continue to differ markedly in poverty rates, educational attainment and household assets in national survey data.

Several features distinguish caste today from its classical form. First, overt untouchability has declined in public spaces such as buses and offices, but persists in domestic, religious and neighbourhood settings, as well as in access to water, housing and marriage. Second, caste has become a political identity, mobilised in competitive democracy through parties, associations

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and quotas (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2018). Third, caste is increasingly reproduced through market and institutional mechanisms, such as networks that distribute jobs, loans and admission advice, rather than through ritual rules alone (Jodhka, 2015). Fourth, there is a growing internal differentiation within marginalised groups, with a small, educated and upwardly mobile section coexisting with a large majority who remain poor, a pattern that complicates any simple account of Dalit disadvantage.

4.1 Relationship Between Caste Identity and Economic Class

The empirical link between caste and class is strong but incomplete. Households belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are over-represented among the poor, among landless agricultural labourers and among casual and informal workers, while upper castes are over-represented among the propertied, salaried and professional classes (Thorat & Dubey, 2012; Oxfam India, 2022a). The inequality of wealth is even more pronounced than that of income, because assets such as land, housing and business capital are transmitted across generations and historically excluded Dalits from ownership.

This helps explain the difference between income gaps and wealth gaps. A Dalit family that enters a salaried job may close part of the income gap in one generation, but without inherited land or capital, it begins from a weaker position and has less to cushion shocks or invest in children's education. A. Deshpande (2011) shows that group disparities in consumption remain even after controlling for education and occupation, which suggests that caste exerts an independent effect on economic outcomes. Thorat and Neuman (2012) document how such an effect operates through discrimination in hiring, in access to credit and inputs, and in market transactions.

At the same time, class modifies the experience of caste. An affluent, urban, educated Dalit professional may enjoy opportunities unavailable to a landless labourer of the same caste, yet may still encounter prejudice, exclusion from social circles and assumptions that their success owes to reservation rather than ability. Conversely, poor upper-caste households face genuine material deprivation, although they are less exposed to the stigma and violence that accompany lower-caste status. S. Deshpande (2013) argues that recognising these cross-cutting positions is essential to avoid reducing the analysis to either a caste-only or a class-only story.

4.2 Rural and Urban Dimensions of Social Inequality

In rural India, caste and class are tightly interwoven through land. Agricultural land, irrigation and livestock remain concentrated among dominant castes, and many Dalit households rely on wage labour or tenancy under unequal bargaining conditions. Residential segregation within villages, with Dalit settlements located at the periphery, restricts access to services and reinforces

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social distance. Violence and boycotts, often provoked when marginalised groups assert rights over land, wages or dignity, are a distinctive feature of rural caste relations (Teltumbde, 2018).

Urban India is often assumed to be a space where anonymity dilutes caste. The evidence is more mixed. Cities offer new occupations, greater anonymity and expanded educational choices, and many Dalits migrate to escape village hierarchy. Yet urban labour markets are stratified by caste through informal recruitment, subcontracting and the concentration of marginalised groups in low-paid, hazardous work such as sanitation and construction (Jodhka, 2012). Housing markets also exhibit discrimination, with landlords and housing societies in many cities refusing tenants on the basis of caste or dietary habits. Mosse (2018) concludes that urbanisation changes the form of caste inequality but does not remove it.

The rural–urban divide is itself a class divide, and it interacts with caste. Rural households, particularly those from marginalised groups, face weaker infrastructure and lower-quality schooling and health services. Migrants from these groups typically enter cities at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. The result is a double disadvantage in which place and caste jointly determine the opportunities available to a child at birth.

5. Unequal Opportunities and Social Mobility

Education is the main channel through which societies convert talent into mobility, and it is therefore the most important site for assessing structural inequality. India has made impressive progress in expanding enrolment, and the share of students from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in higher education has risen considerably. According to the Ministry of Education (2022), the gross enrolment ratio in higher education for Scheduled Castes is lower than the national average, and the gap for Scheduled Tribes is larger still, indicating that expansion has not translated into parity.

Inequality is not confined to access; it extends to the quality and type of education. Students from marginalised groups are over-represented in government schools with weaker resources and in less prestigious institutions, whereas upper-caste and wealthier students are concentrated in private schools, elite universities and professional programmes. Subramanian (2019) shows that in engineering education, upper-caste groups have been able to use family resources, coaching and networks to dominate the most selective institutions, and that the language of merit conceals the cumulative advantages behind entrance-examination success. Students who gain entry through reservation often face stigma, isolation and language barriers that raise dropout risk. Class matters here as well, since fees, coaching costs and the need to work while studying disproportionately affect poor families (Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

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5.1 Inequality in Employment and Professional Opportunities

The labour market is the second major arena of inequality. Marginalised groups are concentrated in informal, casual and low-wage work and are under-represented in senior managerial, professional and private-sector positions. Thorat and Neuman (2012) report evidence of discrimination in hiring from audit studies in which identical résumés receive different responses depending on the caste signalled by the applicant's name. A. Deshpande (2011) finds that earnings gaps between caste groups persist after adjusting for education and experience, which is consistent with unequal treatment and unequal access to networks.

Public-sector employment, supported by reservation, has been the principal route for Dalit and Adivasi mobility, but the public sector has shrunk relative to the private economy, and outsourcing and contractualisation have reduced the number of secure positions. Oxfam India (2022a) reports that discrimination continues to affect access to regular salaried jobs and that self-employed members of marginalised groups face barriers in access to credit and business networks. Jodhka (2015) finds that many entrepreneurs from disadvantaged communities remain confined to low-margin segments. Social capital is crucial: referrals, informal introductions and "cultural fit" operate as hidden filters that favour those from established networks.

5.2 Access to Healthcare and Essential Services

Health is both an outcome and a determinant of social mobility, and caste and class jointly shape it. Marginalised groups tend to have higher rates of child mortality and malnutrition, lower rates of immunisation and institutional delivery, and weaker access to quality care. The reasons are partly economic, because out-of-pocket spending is a major cause of impoverishment, and partly social, because discrimination within health facilities, residential segregation and the poor reach of public services combine to discourage use.

Access to basic services, including drinking water, sanitation, electricity and housing, is also stratified. Mosse (2018) notes that exclusion from shared resources, such as village wells and cremation grounds, is one of the most persistent forms of caste discrimination, and that its health consequences are significant. Oxfam India (2022a) draws attention to how discrimination and intersecting disadvantages, including gender and religion, reduce the use of essential services. For women from marginalised groups, caste, class and gender disadvantage multiply, producing some of the most severe outcomes in maternal and child health.

Digital technology is the newest arena of opportunity, and it increasingly governs access to education, jobs, welfare benefits and financial services. The pandemic years made this dependence vivid, as schooling and public services moved online. Oxfam India (2022b) shows that access to computers, smartphones and the internet is strongly stratified by caste, class, gender and place of residence, with Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and rural households less

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likely to own devices or have reliable connectivity than urban, upper-caste and wealthier households.

The digital divide is more than a gap in ownership. It also includes differences in digital skills, language, affordability and quality of use. A household with a single shared smartphone, for example, cannot offer a child the same learning environment as one with a laptop and broadband connection. Because digital resources are unevenly distributed and the benefits compound over time, technology may amplify existing hierarchies unless access and skills are deliberately extended. This is a clear example of structural inequality: no individual intends the exclusion, but the pattern of access reproduces earlier advantage.

6. Results, Discussion and Sociological Analysis

6.1 Major Patterns of Caste-Based Inequality

The review of evidence yields four consistent patterns. First, persistence: caste gaps in education, income, assets and employment remain large across decades and datasets (A. Deshpande, 2011; Desai & Dubey, 2011). Second, overlap with class: marginalised castes are concentrated at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, particularly in landlessness, informal work and low-wage occupations (Thorat & Dubey, 2012). Third, independence: caste disadvantage persists after controlling for education and occupation, suggesting discrimination and network effects that class alone cannot explain (Thorat & Neuman, 2012). Fourth, adaptation: caste is reproduced through contemporary institutions, including markets, educational credentials and digital systems, rather than only through ritual rules (Jodhka, 2015; Mosse, 2018).

These patterns support the argument that caste and class must be analysed together. They also illustrate why S. Deshpande (2013) cautions against treating the general category as caste-less: dominant groups accumulate advantage through the same structures that disadvantage others, and this advantage becomes invisible when it is described as merit.

Table 1. Major patterns of caste-based inequality identified in the literature

Pattern	What the evidence shows	Key sources
Persistence	Caste gaps in education, income, assets and employment remain large across decades and datasets	Desai & Dubey (2011); A. Deshpande (2011)
Overlap with class	Scheduled Castes and Tribes are concentrated among landless, informal and low-wage workers	Thorat & Dubey (2012); Oxfam India (2022a)
Independence	Disadvantage persists after controlling for education and occupation, indicating discrimination and network effects	Thorat & Neuman (2012)

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Pattern	What the evidence shows	Key sources
Adaptation	Caste is reproduced through markets, credentials and digital systems, not only ritual rules	Jodhka (2015); Mosse (2018)

6.2 Relationship Between Social Background and Economic Opportunities

From a Marxian standpoint, the findings confirm that ownership of land and capital is the primary determinant of economic security, and the concentration of both among upper castes explains much of the observed economic disparity (Chancel & Piketty, 2019). From a Weberian standpoint, they show that status honour and social networks translate into market advantage through hiring, credit and admission practices (Subramanian, 2019; Weber, 2019). From an Ambedkarite standpoint, they demonstrate that graded inequality gives dominant groups a vested interest in sustaining hierarchy, which helps to explain resistance to redistribution and to reservation (Ambedkar, 2014).

In practical terms, social background works as a bundle of resources: wealth, parental education, social contacts, language, location and cultural confidence. A child born into an upper-caste, urban, professional household inherits most of this bundle, whereas a child born into a landless Dalit household inherits very little. Because opportunity is cumulative, small early differences widen over the life course. This is the mechanism by which structural inequality is converted into unequal outcomes even in the absence of explicit discrimination at any single point.

6.3 Educational and Occupational Disparities

The educational and occupational findings are tightly linked. Disparities in school quality and higher-education access feed directly into labour-market outcomes, since credentials and institutional prestige strongly affect hiring and pay (Subramanian, 2019). Marginalised graduates often face a double penalty: they are less likely to attend elite institutions and, when they do graduate, are more likely to face discrimination and lack the networks that secure good positions (Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

The occupational structure shows corresponding concentration. Marginalised groups are clustered in agriculture, construction, sanitation and informal services, while upper castes are more heavily represented in professional, managerial and business occupations (Oxfam India, 2022a). Reservation has opened public-sector pathways, and the emergence of an educated Dalit and Adivasi middle class is a real achievement, but the narrowing of public employment limits the scope of this route (A. Deshpande, 2013).

Table 2. Educational and occupational disparities by social position (qualitative synthesis)

Domain	Typical position of marginalised groups	Typical position of advantaged groups	Main mechanism	Key sources

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Domain	Typical position of marginalised groups	Typical position of advantaged groups	Main mechanism	Key sources
Schooling	Concentrated in under-resourced government schools	Concentrated in private schools with coaching and networks	Unequal school quality and family resources	Ministry of Education (2022); Subramanian (2019)
Higher education	Lower enrolment; less access to selective institutions; higher risk of stigma and dropout	Dominant in elite and professional programmes	Credential accumulation presented as merit	Subramanian (2019); Thorat & Neuman (2012)
Hiring and earnings	Lower interview call-backs; earnings gaps after adjusting for education	Better access to referrals and professional networks	Discrimination and social capital	A. Deshpande (2011); Thorat & Neuman (2012)
Occupational structure	Agriculture, construction, sanitation and informal services	Professional, managerial and business occupations	Inherited assets and occupational segregation	Oxfam India (2022a)
Public employment	Main route of mobility through reservation, but shrinking	Majority of private-sector senior positions	Contractualisation and limited private-sector coverage	A. Deshpande (2013)

The cumulative effect of these disparities is a constrained pattern of mobility. Upward mobility among marginalised groups has occurred, but it is typically short-range and fragile, and downward mobility among advantaged groups is limited by inherited assets and networks. Intergenerational outcomes therefore remain strongly associated with caste and class origin. In Weberian terms, closure keeps the most valued positions within established groups; in Marxian terms, the ownership structure changes slowly; and in Ambedkar's terms, the system of graded inequality offers few incentives to those just above the bottom to unite with those at the very bottom.

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Three implications follow. First, interventions that address only one domain, such as school enrolment or credit, will have limited effect unless they also tackle linked disadvantages in other domains. Second, the quality of opportunity matters as much as its quantity; expanding access without improving quality may reproduce inequality at a larger scale. Third, new arenas such as digital technology need to be governed with equity in view from the outset, since early gaps compound (Oxfam India, 2022b). Taken together, the evidence supports the central claim of this study: caste and class jointly constitute a structure that shapes life chances, and sustained mobility requires dismantling both economic and social barriers.

7. Conclusion

The evidence across education, employment, healthcare and digital access shows consistent and mutually reinforcing disparities. Marginalised groups have gained from constitutional safeguards, reservation and welfare programmes, and a visible middle class has emerged among them. Yet gaps in wealth, quality of education, access to secure employment and technological resources remain wide. The reproduction of advantage through networks, credentials and inherited assets, often presented as merit, ensures that mobility is partial and uneven.

The study suggests several directions for policy and research. Policy should combine redistributive measures, such as investment in public schooling, health and digital infrastructure, with measures against discrimination in private labour, credit and housing markets. Reservation should be complemented by early-stage support so that disadvantage is addressed before it accumulates. Research should make greater use of intergenerational and wealth data disaggregated by caste, and should attend to differences within marginalised groups and to intersections with gender and religion.

The limitations of this paper should be acknowledged. It is based on secondary sources and does not generate new primary data, and the evidence it uses varies in coverage and in date. Future empirical work, including longitudinal studies and mixed-method fieldwork, would help to test the framework developed here. The central conclusion nevertheless stands: a society committed to equality of opportunity must confront caste and class together, because the neglect of either allows structural inequality to persist.

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