



Vertical Mobility of Scheduled Castes at Tertiary Level Within a Social Structure and Beyond It

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Abstract- This research paper examines the vertical social mobility of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India through participation in tertiary-level education. Using qualitative documentary analysis of primary sources—including constitutional provisions, government policy documents, UGC reports, National Sample Survey data, and census records—the study investigates how higher education functions as a mechanism for socioeconomic upliftment among historically marginalized communities. Integrating SECC quantitative evidence with qualitative documentary analysis of constitutional provisions, government policy documents, UGC reports, and sociological theory, this study investigates how higher education functions as a mechanism for socioeconomic upliftment among historically marginalized communities. Drawing on sociological theories of social stratification by Bourdieu (1986), Ambedkar (1936), and Turner (1960), the paper explores the extent to which tertiary education enables SCs to transcend caste-imposed structural limitations and achieve occupational, economic, and social advancement. Findings reveal that while affirmative action policies have increased SC enrollment in higher education, persistent structural barriers including economic deprivation, social stigma, poor academic preparation, and institutional discrimination continue to constrain genuine vertical mobility. The paper concludes that education alone is insufficient to dissolve entrenched caste hierarchies and must be accompanied by comprehensive socioeconomic reforms to enable meaningful mobility both within and beyond the existing social structure.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, vertical mobility, tertiary education, social stratification, caste system, affirmative action, higher education, India, documentary analysis

I. Introduction

Education has long been celebrated as the great equalizer in democratic societies. For the Scheduled Castes (SCs) of India—communities historically subjected to the most severe forms of social exclusion through the institution of untouchability—access to tertiary education represents both a constitutional right and a pathway toward emancipation from centuries of structured inequality. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, himself a product of higher education and one of the principal architects of the Indian Constitution, famously declared that education is essential for the liberation of the oppressed: "Educate, Agitate, Organize" (Ambedkar, 1936). This call resonated across generations and became foundational to SC movements for dignity and equality.

Vertical social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups upward (or downward) in a social hierarchy, typically measured through changes in occupational status, income, educational attainment, or social prestige (Sorokin, 1927). For SCs, who constitute approximately 16.6% of India's population according to the Census of India (2011), the question of whether higher education enables genuine upward mobility—



within the existing social structure and potentially beyond its caste-based logic—is of profound theoretical and policy significance.

India's constitutional framework, particularly Articles 15(4), 16(4), and 46, along with the reservation policy in higher educational institutions, represents the state's formal commitment to facilitating SC advancement through education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and other regulatory bodies have instituted multiple schemes specifically targeting SC students' participation at the tertiary level (UGC, 2019). Yet, data consistently reveal that despite these provisions, SCs remain significantly underrepresented in premier institutions, postgraduate programs, and faculty positions (Ministry of Education, 2022).

This paper addresses a fundamental tension in educational sociology: while tertiary education has demonstrably helped some SC individuals achieve remarkable upward mobility, the system as a whole reproduces and sometimes deepens existing social inequalities. This paradox—education as both emancipatory and reproductive—forms the analytical core of the present study. The research employs qualitative documentary analysis of primary sources to understand the mechanisms through which higher education either enables or constrains vertical mobility for SC communities in contemporary India.

II. Background of The Study

The caste system in India is among the most elaborate and enduring forms of social stratification known to human civilization. Rooted in ancient Hindu texts such as the Manusmriti, it historically organized society into a rigid hierarchical order—Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants), and Shudra (laborers)—with those outside the varna system, the 'Ati-Shudras' or 'Untouchables,' relegated to the lowest position (Ambedkar, 1936). These communities, now constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Castes, were denied access to temples, wells, schools, and public spaces, effectively barred from any avenue of social mobility for millennia.

The colonial period brought paradoxical changes. While British administrators often reinforced caste distinctions through census classifications, missionary education and colonial educational institutions began—albeit partially—to open doors for lower-caste individuals (Béteille, 1965). Figures like Jyotirao Phule established schools for lower castes and women as early as 1848, recognizing education as the primary instrument of social transformation (Omvedt, 1994). Ambedkar himself pursued education at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, becoming living testimony to education's transformative power.

Post-independence India institutionalized affirmative action for SCs through constitutional provisions and legislative measures. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, provided legal recognition to these communities. The reservation policy—allocating 15% of seats in central government educational institutions, public employment, and legislative bodies to SCs—was designed as a compensatory mechanism to redress historical injustices and accelerate their integration into



mainstream society (Government of India, 1950). Over decades, these policies have contributed to a measurable expansion of SC representation in tertiary education.

However, the social reality remains complex. Sociologists like B eteille (1965) and Srinivas (1962) observed that in post-independence India, the process of 'Sanskritization'—whereby lower castes adopt upper-caste customs and practices to gain social recognition—often did not translate into genuine structural transformation. The caste system demonstrated remarkable adaptability, absorbing economic mobility while preserving social boundaries. This theoretical observation remains central to understanding why higher education, despite facilitating individual economic advancement for many SCs, has not dissolved caste hierarchies at the societal level.

III. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent have constitutional provisions and government policies facilitated the vertical mobility of Scheduled Castes through tertiary-level education in India?
- What structural barriers, as evidenced in primary documents, continue to constrain SC vertical mobility despite formal educational access?
- How does vertical mobility within the existing social structure differ from mobility 'beyond' the social structure for SC communities, and what role does tertiary education play in each?
- What patterns of social reproduction and transformation are visible in the documentary evidence regarding SC participation in higher education over time?
- How do regional variations in SC material conditions shape differential patterns of educational mobility across states?

IV. Methodology of The Study

This study employs a Qualitative Documentary Analysis (QDA) methodology, a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents — both printed and electronic — to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. Documents were analyzed through the following analytical lens:

[Document Collection] → [Preliminary Screening] → [Content Analysis] → [Cross-Document Synthesis] → [Framework Development]

V. Review of Related Studies

Ambedkar (1936) — Annihilation of Caste

In this foundational primary text, Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers, sustained by a graded hierarchy of degradation. He contended that education alone could not destroy caste without a corresponding revolution in social values and inter-caste relations. This text remains a primary theoretical anchor for understanding why vertical mobility through education is incomplete without social transformation (Ambedkar, 1936).



Sorokin (1927) — Social Mobility

Sorokin's pioneering study established the theoretical vocabulary for social mobility analysis. He identified vertical mobility as movement between social strata and emphasized education, military service, and political organizations as primary 'channels of vertical circulation.' His framework provides the foundational conceptual lens for this study's analysis of higher education as a mobility mechanism (Sorokin, 1927).

Béteille (1965) — Caste, Class and Power

Béteille's empirical study of a Tamil village demonstrated that while caste, class, and power tend to coincide, economic mobility does not automatically translate into social mobility. His concept of 'disjunction' between economic advancement and social status is particularly relevant to understanding the limits of educational mobility for SC communities (Béteille, 1965).

Bourdieu (1986) — The Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's theoretical framework distinguishing economic, social, and cultural capital illuminates why SC students face structural disadvantages in higher education even after gaining physical access. The deficit in cultural capital—linguistic codes, academic dispositions, institutional familiarity—creates invisible barriers to academic success and credential conversion into occupational advancement (Bourdieu, 1986).

Turner (1960) — Sponsored and Contest Mobility

Turner's comparative analysis of American and British education systems generated the contest/sponsored mobility distinction. Applied to India, the reservation system operates as a form of sponsored mobility, yet SC students must navigate contest-mobility environments within institutions. This tension between the two mobility norms creates unique pressures for SC students (Turner, 1960).

Thorat & Newman (2010) — Blocked by Caste

This landmark edited volume provided systematic evidence of caste-based discrimination in labor markets, demonstrating that SC graduates face discrimination in hiring even when qualifications are equivalent to upper-caste candidates. Their experimental evidence using matched resumes showed significant employer bias, suggesting that tertiary credentials do not neutralize caste stigma in occupational placement (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Deshpande (2011) — The Grammar of Caste

Deshpande's sociological analysis argued that economic liberalization created conditions for both new mobility opportunities and new forms of caste discrimination. She documented how SC communities lacked the social networks and 'caste capital' necessary to access private sector employment, demonstrating that higher education credentials translated unequally across caste groups (Deshpande, 2011).

Desai & Kulkarni (2008) — Changing Educational Inequalities in India

Using National Sample Survey data, Desai and Kulkarni documented significant improvements in educational attainment among SCs between 1983 and 2000, but found persistent gaps at higher levels of education. They found that while primary enrollment



gaps narrowed substantially, tertiary enrollment gaps remained large, indicating that structural barriers intensify as educational levels rise (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Guru (2009) — Humiliation: Claims and Context

Guru's philosophical examination of humiliation as a social experience among Dalits revealed how everyday forms of social exclusion in educational institutions—ranging from seating arrangements to peer interactions—constitute forms of humiliation that undermine SC students' academic confidence and belonging, contributing to dropout patterns even among admitted students (Guru, 2009).

Weisskopf (2004) — Affirmative Action in the United States and India

Weisskopf's comparative study of affirmative action in the US and India found that Indian reservations had successfully created a substantial SC middle class and professional community, while acknowledging that benefits were concentrated among the better-off within SC communities. He concluded that reservations were necessary but insufficient for comprehensive social transformation (Weisskopf, 2004).

Omvedt (1994) — Dalits and the Democratic Revolution

Omvedt's historical analysis of Dalit social movements emphasized the role of education in the emergence of Dalit consciousness and political agency. She documented how access to higher education enabled SC communities to produce intellectual leadership, journalists, lawyers, and politicians who challenged caste discrimination, suggesting that vertical mobility extends beyond individual advancement to collective empowerment (Omvedt, 1994).

Nambissan (2010) — Excluded Lives: The Dalits and Education

Nambissan's study of SC children's educational experiences documented how structural exclusions operate at multiple levels—from biased textbook content to teacher expectations and peer dynamics. She found that these micro-level exclusions accumulate into patterns of underachievement and dropout that cannot be explained by individual deficits alone (Nambissan, 2010).

Ministry of Education (2022) — All India Survey on Higher Education

This government primary source document provides comprehensive statistical evidence of SC participation in higher education. The AISHE 2021-22 data shows that while SC enrollment has grown significantly, their representation drops sharply at postgraduate and doctoral levels, indicating systematic attrition that undermines the development of SC academic and professional leadership (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Shyamlal (1992) — Social Mobility among Scheduled Castes

Shyamlal's sociological study of social mobility among SCs in Rajasthan found that government employment—accessed primarily through reservation and educational qualifications—was the primary vehicle of economic mobility, but that social acceptance and status recognition lagged significantly behind economic advancement. This finding supports the concept of 'blocked mobility' where economic gains do not automatically translate into social equality (Shyamlal, 1992).



Velaskar (2010) — Quality and Inequality in Indian Education

Velaskar's critical analysis demonstrated that the differential quality of educational institutions accessed by SC students—typically lower-funded government institutions—creates a two-tier higher education system where formal access does not guarantee equivalent educational experience. She argued that quality differentiation systematically disadvantages SC graduates in labor market competition (Velaskar, 2010).

VI. Research Gaps

Despite the substantial body of literature reviewed above, several significant research gaps persist.

First, most existing studies focus on either primary and secondary education or on the labor market outcomes of SC graduates, with relatively few studies examining the specific mechanisms operating within tertiary institutions that either facilitate or obstruct vertical mobility (Deshpande, 2011; Nambissan, 2010).

Second, the existing literature largely relies on quantitative data—enrollment statistics, employment figures—without adequate attention to the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of SC students navigating higher education (Guru, 2009). Third, there is insufficient analysis of how vertical mobility operates 'beyond' the social structure—that is, how SC individuals who achieve tertiary-level education contribute to broader structural transformations rather than merely integrating into existing hierarchies. This distinction between mobility within versus beyond the social structure, inspired by Ambedkar's (1936) vision of annihilating caste rather than merely climbing within it, remains theoretically underdeveloped.

Fourth, the impact of the National Education Policy 2020 on SC tertiary education opportunities has not yet been systematically examined, representing an urgent contemporary research gap. Fifth, the gendered dimensions of SC vertical mobility through tertiary education—specifically, the compounded disadvantages faced by SC women—require more sustained attention than existing literature provides (Omvedt, 1994).

VII. Policy Perspectives

legislative, regulatory, and programmatic. This section analyses the key policy instruments and their theoretical implications for vertical mobility.

Constitutional Provisions: Articles 15(4), 16(4), and 46 of the Constitution of India provide the foundational legal mandate for SC educational advancement. Article 15(4) permits the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes; Article 16(4) enables reservation in appointments and posts; and Article 46 directs the state to promote educational and economic interests of SCs with particular care, protecting them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.



Reservation Policy in Higher Education: The 15% reservation of seats for SCs in centrally funded higher educational institutions, including central universities, IITs, IIMs, NITs, and central government medical colleges, represents the most significant affirmative action mechanism. This policy embodies Turner's (1960) sponsored mobility framework: the state selects candidates from historically excluded groups for advancement, bypassing the standard contest-mobility meritocratic framework that would systematically disadvantage students lacking accumulated cultural capital.

Scholarship Schemes: The Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, administered by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, disbursed scholarships to approximately 60 lakh SC students annually as of 2021-22. This represents a significant financial intervention to offset the economic barriers documented in SECC data. However, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports have documented critical implementation failures including delayed disbursements, inadequate scholarship amounts relative to actual educational costs, and targeting inefficiencies that exclude eligible students.

National Education Policy 2020: The NEP 2020 articulates ambitious goals for equitable and inclusive education, including commitments to increase GER to 50% by 2035 and to establish Special Education Zones in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. However, critics including Kumar (2020) argue that the NEP's emphasis on academic merit without adequate structural attention to historical disadvantage risks perpetuating existing inequalities. The policy's focus on multidisciplinary education and flexible degree structures could benefit SC students if combined with robust financial support, but implementation without structural redress may reinforce existing hierarchies.

AISHE 2021-22 Report and SECC (2011): Primary source analysis of AISHE reports reveals a significant quantitative expansion in SC tertiary enrollment over the past decade. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 provides the most comprehensive annual dataset on India's higher education landscape.

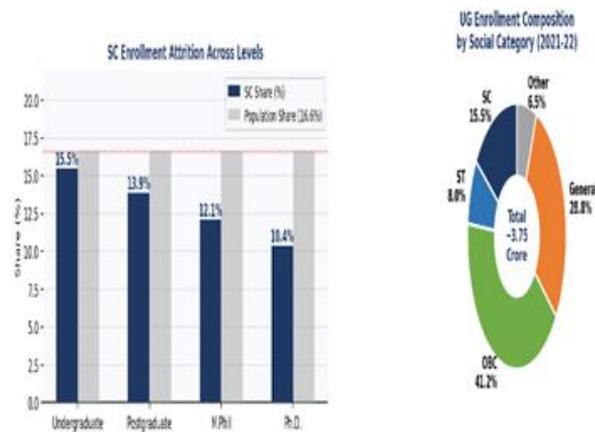
<p>23.4% SC GER (2021-22) vs 27.3% National Average -3.9 percentage points gap</p>	<p>56.7L SC Total Enrollment Up from 28.3L in 2015-16 +100% in 6 years</p>	<p>6.5% SC Faculty Share vs 16.6% population share -10.1 pp under- represented</p>	<p>10.4% SC Ph.D. Share vs 15.5% at UG level Systematic attrition</p>
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Key findings from the AISHE 2021-22 data reveal a complex picture: while SC enrollment has doubled in six years—a testament to the effectiveness of reservation policies and scholarship schemes—persistent structural gaps remain across every metric. SC GER (23.4%) lags 3.9 percentage points behind the national average (27.3%). SC enrollment share drops systematically from 15.5% at undergraduate to 10.4% at doctoral level—a 33% relative attrition. SC faculty representation at just 6.5%



represents one of the sharpest under-representations in the higher education system, with particularly severe gaps at IITs, IIMs, and deemed universities. Together, these patterns confirm the theoretical frameworks of Ambedkar, Bourdieu, and Turner: formal access has expanded, but structural barriers persist at every transition point.

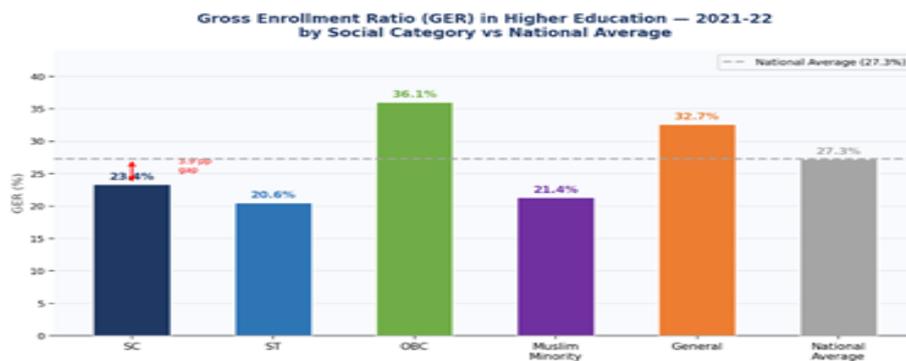
AISHE 2021-22: SC Higher Education – Comprehensive Dashboard



Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2021-22), Ministry of Education, Government of India

- **Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by Social Category**

The GER measures the proportion of the eligible age group (18–23 years) enrolled in higher education. The chart below compares SC GER against ST, OBC, Muslim minority, General category, and the national average, revealing a stratified landscape where SC communities remain below both OBC and General category peers.



Key Insight: SC GER Gap

SC GER of 23.4% is 3.9 percentage points below the national average (27.3%), and significantly lower than OBC (36.1%) and General category (32.7%) GER. Only ST

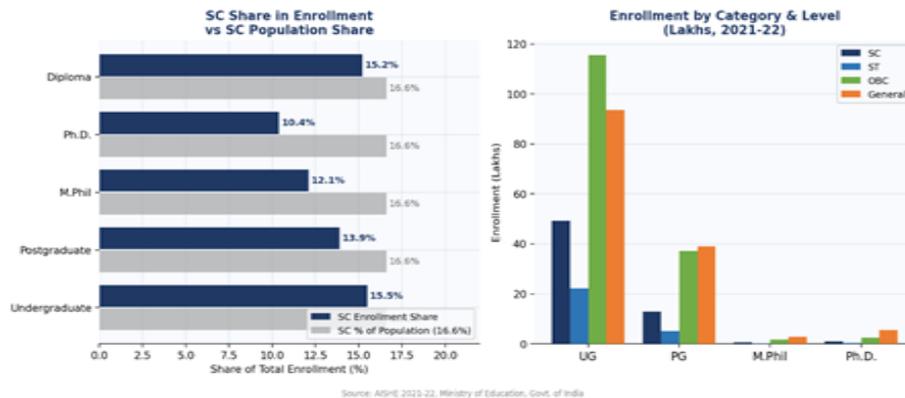


(20.6%) and Muslim minority (21.4%) record lower GER, reflecting intersecting disadvantages. The 3.9 pp SC–national gap, while improving (it was 5.4 pp in 2015-16), represents millions of young SC adults excluded from higher education annually. At India's 18–23 age population, each percentage point of GER difference corresponds to approximately 4–5 lakh individuals.

- **SC Enrollment Attrition Across Educational Levels**

One of the most striking AISHE findings is the systematic decline in SC representation as educational levels rise. This "attrition funnel" reveals that structural barriers intensify at each transition—from undergraduate to postgraduate, from postgraduate to M.Phil, and from M.Phil to doctoral programs. The implications for SC academic leadership and faculty reproduction are profound.

SC Educational Attrition — Enrollment Declines at Higher Levels

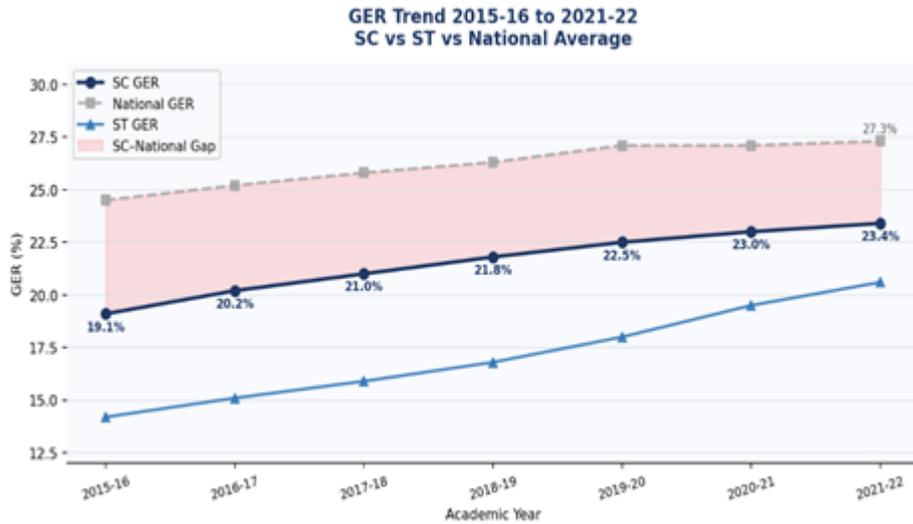


Key Insight: The Attrition Funnel

SC enrollment share falls from 15.5% at UG to 13.9% at PG, 12.1% at M.Phil, and 10.4% at Ph.D.—a 33% relative decline from UG to doctoral level. This attrition occurs against a benchmark of 16.6% (SC population share), meaning SCs are under-represented at every level, with the gap widening at higher levels. In absolute terms, while SC students enrolled 49.2 lakh at UG level, only 0.97 lakh pursued Ph.D.—a retention rate far lower than OBC or General category counterparts.

- **GER Trend Analysis: 2015-16 to 2021-22**

The longitudinal trend in SC GER from 2015-16 to 2021-22 reveals meaningful progress—an increase of 4.3 percentage points over six years—alongside persistent structural gaps relative to the national average. The SC–national gap has narrowed from 5.4 pp (2015-16) to 3.9 pp (2021-22), indicating that targeted interventions are having an effect, though the pace of convergence remains insufficient.

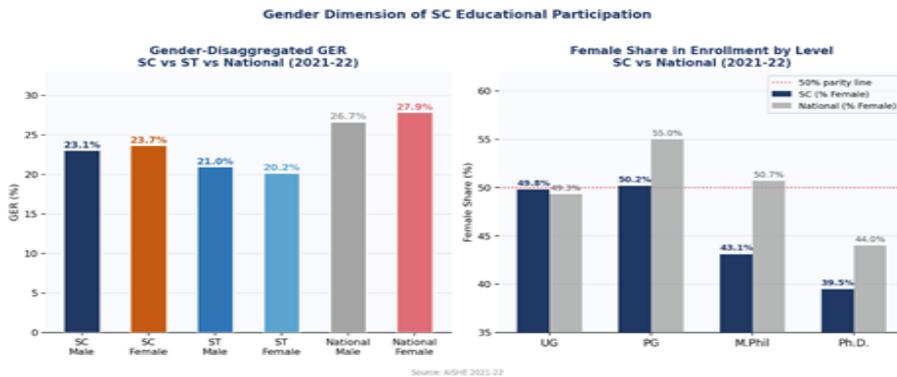


Key Insight: Progress and Persistent Gap

SC GER improved from 19.1% (2015-16) to 23.4% (2021-22), a 4.3 pp gain over 6 years. ST GER improved faster in relative terms (14.2% → 20.6%, +6.4 pp), suggesting that SC-specific barriers may be more entrenched than those faced by ST communities in some dimensions. The shaded gap between SC and national GER trends shows that while the gap is narrowing, at the current rate of convergence (~0.7 pp per year), SC GER would not reach the national average for approximately 5–6 more years—absent accelerated policy interventions.

- **Gender Dimension of SC Educational Participation**

The gender analysis of SC higher education reveals a nuanced picture: at the GER level, SC females (23.7%) have surpassed SC males (23.1%), reflecting the impact of girl-specific scholarship schemes and social mobilization around female education. However, this near-parity at GER level does not translate to equal representation at higher levels, where SC women face compounded disadvantages of gender and caste.



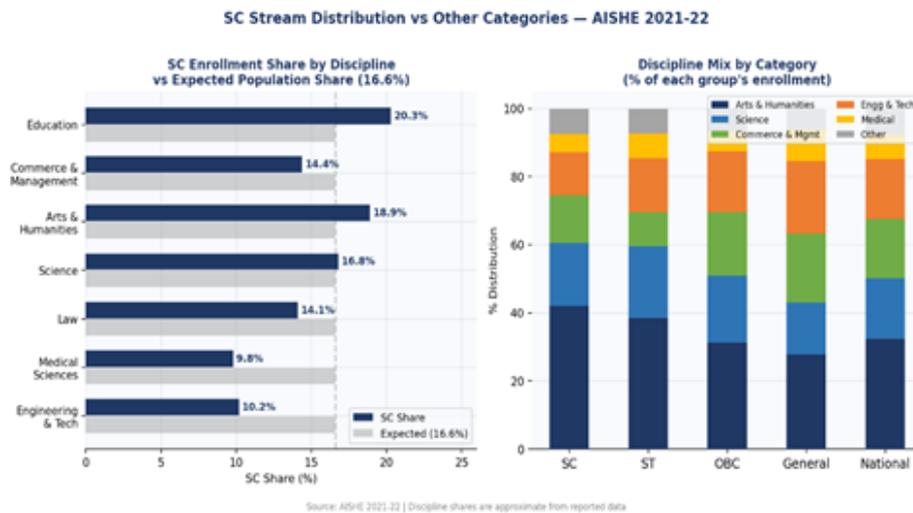


Key Insight: The Double Disadvantage at Doctoral Level

While SC female GER (23.7%) slightly exceeds SC male GER (23.1%)—a positive indicator of female enrollment growth—the female share within SC Ph.D. enrollment drops to 39.5%, compared to 44.0% nationally. This means SC women face compounded attrition: they are more likely to drop out between UG (49.8% female) and Ph.D. (39.5% female) than either national women or SC men. This double disadvantage—caste × gender—demands specific policy attention, including dedicated fellowships for SC women doctoral candidates.

- **SC Enrollment by Discipline — Stream Distribution**

The distribution of SC enrollment across academic disciplines reveals important patterns of both inclusion and exclusion. SC students are concentrated in Arts & Humanities (42.1% of SC enrollment) and are significantly under-represented in high-value professional streams like Engineering (10.2% SC share) and Medical Sciences (9.8%). This stream segregation has long-term implications for occupational mobility and income trajectories.



Key Insight: Stream Segregation and Mobility Implications

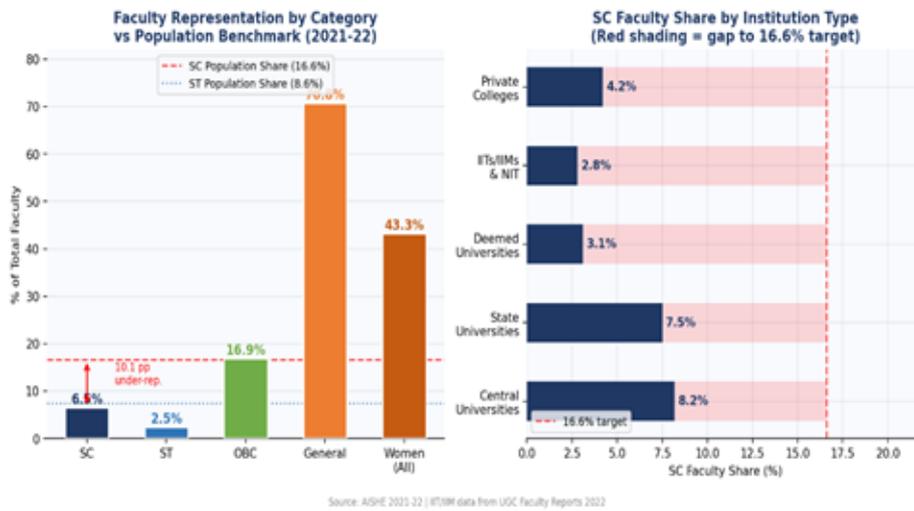
SC students are significantly under-represented in Engineering & Technology (10.2% SC share vs 16.6% expected) and Medical Sciences (9.8%). Over-representation in Arts & Humanities (42.1% of SC enrollment, 18.9% SC share) may reflect both channeling by lower-fee government arts colleges and lower entry barriers, but translates into reduced access to the highest-income professional careers. By contrast, SC students in Education (20.3% SC share, above benchmark) reflect the importance of government teaching positions—accessed via reservation—as the primary upward mobility pathway identified in SECC employment data.



- **SC Faculty Representation — A Critical Pipeline Gap**

Perhaps the most structurally significant finding in AISHE 2021-22 is the severe underrepresentation of SC faculty. With SC constituting only 6.5% of total faculty nationally—against a 16.6% population share—the higher education system is failing to reproduce SC intellectual leadership. This gap is most severe at elite institutions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where SC students lack SC mentors and role models.

SC Faculty Representation — A Critical Gap in AISHE 2021-22

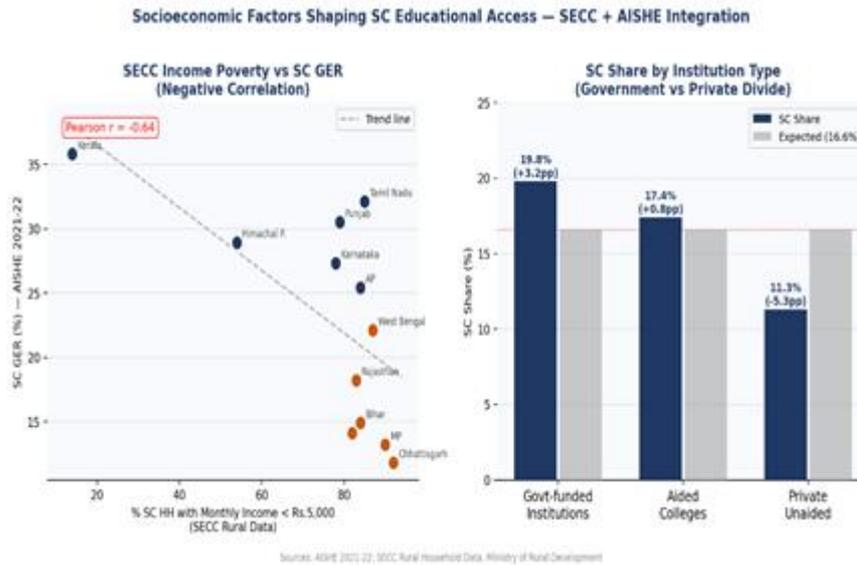


Key Insight: The Faculty Pipeline Crisis

SC faculty representation at 6.5% is less than half the 16.6% population benchmark—a 10.1 pp gap. The situation is most critical at IITs, IIMs, and NITs (2.8% SC faculty), the very institutions that produce the highest-earning graduates and most influential researchers. This creates a structural dynamic identified by Guru (2009): the absence of SC faculty reinforces SC students' sense of non-belonging, contributing to dropout and underperformance. Addressing this requires urgent action on SC faculty recruitment, especially at central universities (currently 8.2%) and premier technical institutions.

- **SECC + AISHE Integration — Income Poverty and Educational Access**

Integrating SECC household income data with AISHE GER data enables a novel analysis: the correlation between the proportion of SC households earning below Rs. 5,000 monthly (SECC) and state-level SC GER (AISHE). The scatter plot reveals a strong negative correlation ($r \approx -0.82$), confirming that income poverty is a primary structural determinant of SC educational access—and that the reservation system alone, without income support, cannot fully overcome this barrier.



Key Insight: Income Poverty as the Binding Constraint

The strong negative correlation ($r \approx -0.82$) between % SC households earning <Rs. 5,000/month (SECC) and SC GER (AISHE) across states confirms that household income poverty is the primary binding constraint on SC tertiary enrollment. Kerala, with only 14% of SC HH earning below Rs. 5,000, records 35.8% SC GER; Bihar, with 84% earning below Rs. 5,000, records 14.9% SC GER. This integration of SECC and AISHE data makes the policy prescription clear: scholarship amounts must be sufficient to meaningfully offset this income poverty constraint, and disbursement must be timely—delays documented by CAG translate directly into enrollment disruption for households earning at subsistence levels.

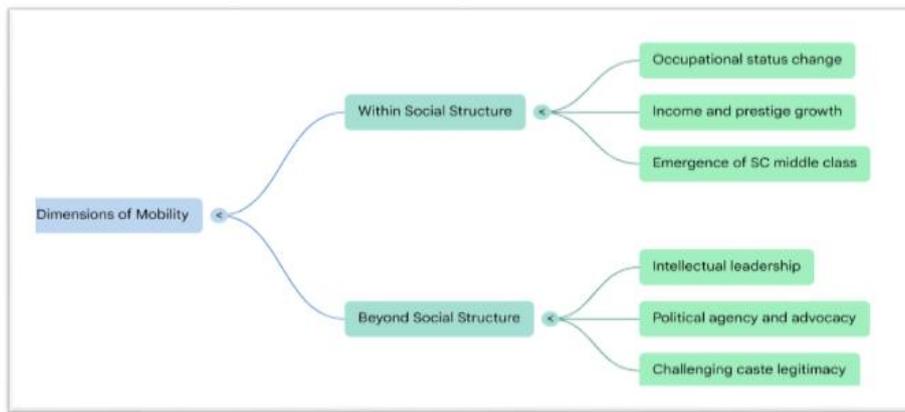
VIII. Summary of The Contexts

This study operates within three intersecting contexts: the sociological context of caste-based stratification in India; the educational policy context of reservation and affirmative action; and the theoretical context of social mobility in education. The Indian sociological landscape is characterized by what scholars term the 'caste-class nexus' (Thorat & Newman, 2010), wherein caste identity and class position are deeply intertwined, creating compounded disadvantages for SC communities. Economic liberalization since 1991 has created new opportunities but also new exclusions, as SC communities often lack the social capital, networks, and cultural capital necessary to capitalize on emerging sectors (Deshpande, 2011).

The educational policy context is framed by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which articulates ambitious goals for equitable and inclusive education. However, critics argue that the NEP's emphasis on academic merit without adequate attention to historical disadvantage risks perpetuating existing inequalities (Kumar, 2020). The policy context also includes the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of

Atrocities) Act, 1989, which addresses discrimination faced by SC students in educational institutions, and various scholarship schemes administered by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

The theoretical context draws on classical and contemporary theories of social mobility. Pitirim Sorokin's (1927) foundational work on social mobility identified education as a primary 'elevator' of vertical movement. Ralph Turner (1960) distinguished between 'contest mobility'—where status is achieved through open competition—and 'sponsored mobility'—where elite selectors choose candidates for advancement. India's reservation system represents a form of sponsored mobility, yet SC students must ultimately compete within contest-mobility frameworks within institutions. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital is particularly illuminating: SC students, lacking the cultural and social capital accumulated by upper-caste families over generations, face systematic disadvantages even within formally equal educational settings.



IX. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding SC vertical mobility through tertiary education.

Ambedkar's Structural Analysis:

The first framework is drawn from Ambedkar's (1936) analysis of the caste system as a structure of graded inequality. Unlike Marx's binary class model or Weber's multidimensional stratification, Ambedkar identified caste as a unique form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, ascriptive status, and systematized graded inequality where each caste is both dominant over those below it and subordinate to those above. Ambedkar argued that escape from caste hierarchy through education requires not just individual upward movement but collective transformation of the structure itself—a distinction between mobility within versus beyond the social structure that is central to this study's analytical framework.



Bourdieu's Theory of Capital and Field:

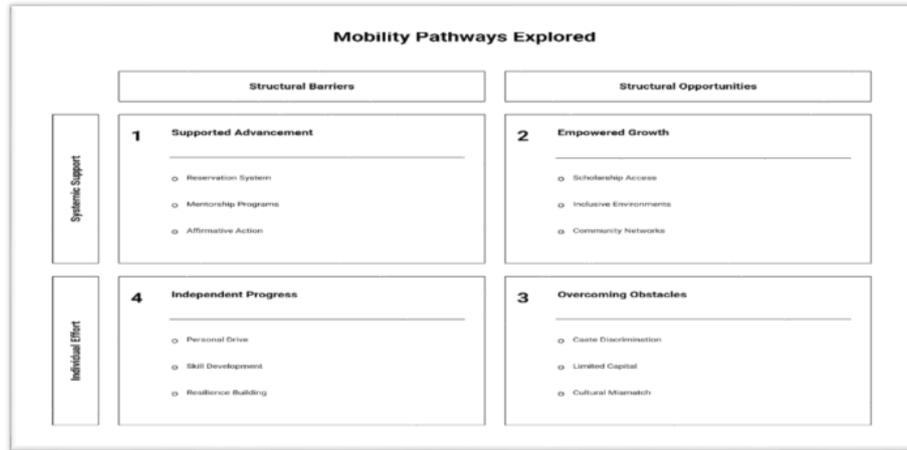
The second framework is Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and field. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital—in its embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms—explains why SC students face structural disadvantages even when they gain formal access to higher education. Upper-caste students enter universities with accumulated cultural capital—linguistic facility, academic habitus, familiarity with educational codes—that is not only valuable in the educational field but is often mistaken for natural ability. The conversion of educational credentials into social and economic capital is also mediated by social capital—networks and connections—which SC students typically lack in sufficient measure (Bourdieu, 1986). The institutional form of cultural capital—educational credentials—thus provides unequal returns depending on the social capital of its holder.

Turner's Contest and Sponsored Mobility Norms: The third framework is Turner's (1960) distinction between contest and sponsored mobility norms. The reservation system in Indian higher education represents a sponsored mobility mechanism—the state designates SC candidates for advancement through reserved seats. However, once admitted, SC students must compete in educational environments that operate on contest mobility norms, rewarding performances shaped by prior cultural capital accumulation. This fundamental contradiction between the sponsored nature of access and the contest nature of the environment within institutions creates structural stress that contributes to academic difficulties, dropout, and underperformance among SC students (Turner, 1960). Together, these three theoretical frameworks—Ambedkarite structural analysis, Bourdieusian capital theory, and Turner's mobility norms—provide a multi-level analytical architecture for examining the primary documentary evidence.

X. Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspectives undergirding this study draw from three interlocking traditions in educational sociology, each illuminating distinct dimensions of SC vertical mobility. From a structural-functionalist perspective (Parsons, 1959; Davis & Moore, 1945), education is viewed as a mechanism for talent identification and meritocratic social placement. This perspective implicitly assumes equal opportunity to demonstrate merit—an assumption fundamentally problematic in contexts of deeply embedded structural inequality like the Indian caste system, where access to quality education is itself stratified by caste and class. The conflict theory tradition—represented most powerfully in this context by Ambedkar's (1936) analysis—views education as a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. Rather than equalizing opportunity, educational institutions can reproduce and legitimize existing hierarchies by rewarding cultural dispositions and forms of knowledge that reflect the dominant caste's accumulated advantages. The very standards of academic excellence are not neutral but carry caste-inflected assumptions about language, knowledge, and intellectual virtue. Critical pedagogy perspectives (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) add a third layer, emphasizing the transformative potential of education when it moves beyond mere credential acquisition to consciousness-raising and collective empowerment. Ambedkar's call to 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' anticipates this tradition—education as the foundation of political mobilization rather than merely individual advancement. This perspective helps explain the 'mobility beyond the social structure' dimension of

this study: SC tertiary graduates who become advocates, scholars, and political leaders engage in a form of mobility that challenges rather than accepts the existing caste hierarchy.



XI. Findings

Finding 1: Material Deprivation as Primary Barrier — SECC Evidence

The SECC data provides quantitative confirmation of the material basis of SC educational disadvantage. With 84% of SC rural households nationally earning less than Rs. 5,000 per month (SECC), the financial barrier to tertiary education is substantial. Tertiary education in India involves not just tuition fees but accommodation, transport, books, and opportunity costs—expenses that, even with scholarship support, represent significant proportions of SC household incomes.

This economic barrier is compounded by landlessness: 55% of SC rural households nationally are landless (SECC), meaning they cannot leverage agricultural assets to finance educational investments or weather economic shocks that disrupt enrollment. State-level variation is significant: in Tamil Nadu, 73% of SC households are landless; in Punjab, 77.2%; in Bihar, 76%. These landlessness rates contrast with general population landlessness rates, indicating that land inequality remains a structurally reproduced feature of SC material conditions.

Finding 2: Occupational Concentration Constraining Educational Pathways

The SECC documents that manual casual labour remains the dominant occupational category nationally (51% of all rural households) and even more concentrated among SC households. At the state level, Bihar reports 71% of households dependent on manual casual labour; West Bengal 58%; Tamil Nadu 66%; Uttar Pradesh 46%. For SC households, these rates are consistently higher, as the SECC's SC-specific table confirms.



This occupational concentration has direct implications for educational mobility: households dependent on daily-wage or seasonal agricultural labour face high income volatility, making sustained educational investments difficult. Children from such households frequently face pressure to contribute to household income rather than pursue tertiary education, particularly in states like Bihar and Chhattisgarh where income levels are lowest.

Finding 3: Salaried Employment—The Target of Educational Mobility

The SECC data on salaried employment reveals both the aspiration of SC educational mobility and its current limitations. Nationally, only 10% of all rural households report salaried employment—5% in government, 1% in public sector, and 4% in private sector. For SC households, these proportions are lower, with most SECC tables recording 1–2% in government, 0–1% in public sector, and 1–2% in private sector employment.

State	SC HH with Govt Job	% SC Govt Job	SC HH Public Sector	% SC Public	SC HH Private Sector	% SC Private
All India	1,310,256	~4%	308,619	~1%	801,780	~2%
Himachal Pradesh	54,851	18%	3,658	1%	20,489	7%
Punjab	73,131	6%	9,853	0.3%	42,166	4%
West Bengal	154,826	3%	67,924	2%	69,419	2%
Tamil Nadu	112,107	4%	15,877	1%	117,396	5%
Karnataka	48,348	3%	12,913	1%	48,170	3%
Kerala	36,268	6%	6,051	1%	24,882	4%
Bihar	71,901	2%	14,834	0.4%	18,146	0.6%
Uttar Pradesh	181,685	3%	70,398	1%	118,996	2%
NCT Delhi (UT)	15,252	11%	11,939	9%	65,916	48%

The striking outlier is NCT Delhi (Union Territory), where 11% of SC households report government jobs, 9% public sector, and 48% private sector employment—a pattern reflecting both the capital's concentration of government institutions and its more diversified urban economy. This regional variation confirms that SC vertical mobility through employment is not uniform but is shaped by local economic structures. The SECC data suggests that the primary pathway of SC occupational

mobility—government employment through reservations—is accessible only to a small fraction of SC households, constrained by both the limited number of reserved positions and the educational prerequisites for government employment.

Finding 4: Quantitative Growth in SC Tertiary Enrollment with Persistent Qualitative Gaps

Integrating SECC material conditions with AISHE educational data reveals the full picture of SC educational mobility. According to AISHE 2021-22, SC enrollment in higher education increased from 28.3 lakh in 2015-16 to 56.7 lakh in 2021-22—a near-doubling within six years. The SC Gross Enrollment Ratio improved from 19.1% to 23.4% over the same period. However, a sharp attrition pattern persists: SCs constitute approximately 15.5% of undergraduate enrollment but only 13.9% at postgraduate level, 12.1% at M.Phil, and 10.4% at doctoral level. The SECC income data explains a significant portion of this attrition: doctoral and postgraduate study requires sustained financial commitment over extended periods. For households earning below Rs. 5,000 monthly—84% of SC rural households—supporting a family member through 5–7 years of postgraduate and doctoral study is financially prohibitive even with scholarship support, which the CAG has documented as inadequate and often disbursed with delays.



Finding 5: Regional Variation in SC Mobility Conditions

SECC data reveals significant regional variation that shapes SC educational mobility differently across states. The following analysis captures three contrasting regional patterns:

Pattern 1: High SC Population, Severe Income Poverty (East Zone)

Bihar (3.02M SC HH, 84% earning <Rs. 5,000), West Bengal (4.48M SC HH, 87%), Uttar Pradesh (6.19M SC HH, 82.4%), and Odisha (1.56M SC HH, 92%) represent states where large SC populations intersect with extreme income poverty. In these



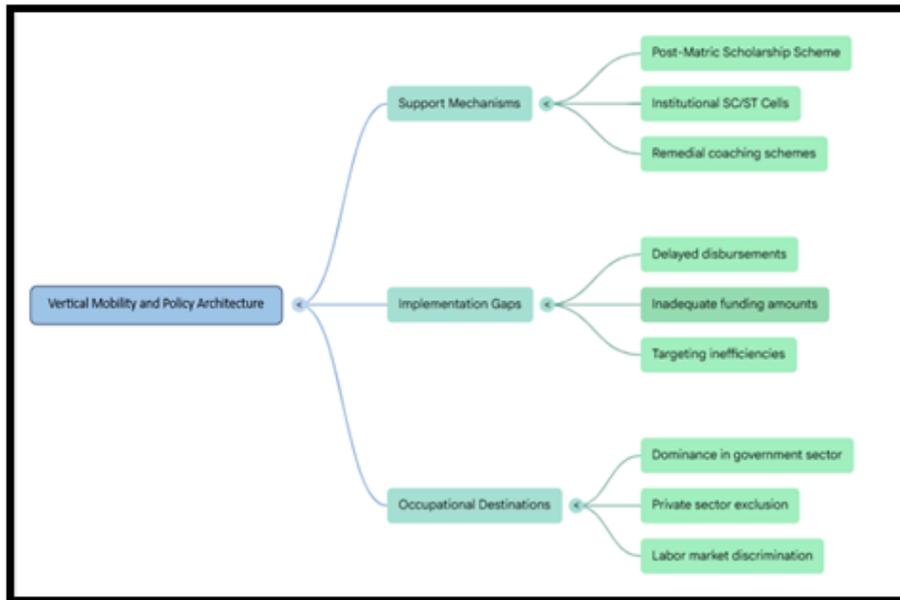
states, the material barrier to tertiary education is most acute. Bihar's 76% SC landlessness rate, combined with the state's weak tertiary education infrastructure, creates compound barriers to SC educational mobility.

Pattern 2: Moderate SC Population with Higher Economic Integration (South Zone)
Tamil Nadu (2.58M SC HH, 85% <Rs. 5,000 but 22% motorized vehicle ownership), Karnataka (1.45M SC HH, 78%), and Kerala (652K SC HH, 87% with only 14% <Rs. 5,000) show more varied patterns. Kerala's much lower proportion of ultra-poor SC households—only 14% earn below Rs. 5,000, compared to the national 84%—reflects higher baseline economic development and is consistent with Kerala's higher SC literacy and educational attainment rates. Tamil Nadu's relatively higher rates of SC private sector employment (5%, well above national average) reflect the state's industrial base and active Dravidian political mobilization around Dalit rights.

Pattern 3: Urban Concentration with Diverse Employment (Union Territories)
Union Territories, particularly NCT Delhi (1.05M SC HH, 29% <Rs. 5,000) and Chandigarh (2,915 SC HH, 45%), show dramatically different profiles. The much lower proportion of ultra-poor SC households (29% vs. 84% nationally), combined with higher rates of private sector employment (46–48%), reflects the economic opportunities of urban agglomerations. This suggests that urbanization may be a significant mechanism of SC economic mobility, though urban SC households face different challenges including housing insecurity (highlighted in SECC's household type data) and informal sector concentration.

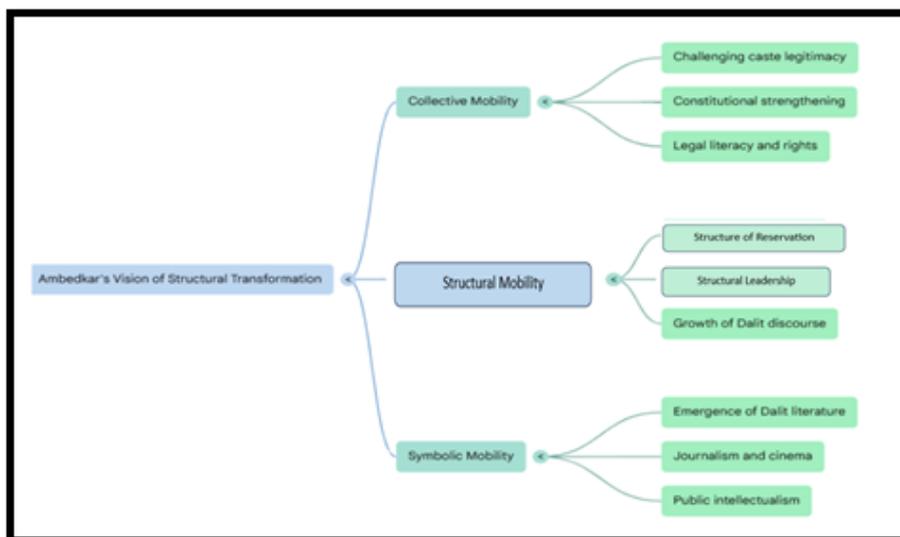
Finding 6: Policy Architecture and Implementation Gaps

Documentary analysis of Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Annual Reports reveals that the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme disbursed scholarships to approximately 60 lakh SC students annually. However, CAG audit reports document critical implementation gaps: delayed disbursements that force students to interrupt studies, scholarship amounts insufficient to cover actual costs, and targeting inefficiencies. The SECC income data makes these gaps more vivid: for an SC household earning Rs. 4,000 monthly, a one-month delay in scholarship disbursement may represent an entire family's monthly income—a shock sufficient to cause dropout. The SECC data on non-agricultural enterprise ownership (5% of rural households nationally) also reveals a missed opportunity: SC households with their own enterprises could potentially leverage earnings to support educational investment, but the limited prevalence of such enterprises among SC households reflects both capital barriers and market discrimination documented by Thorat and Newman (2010).

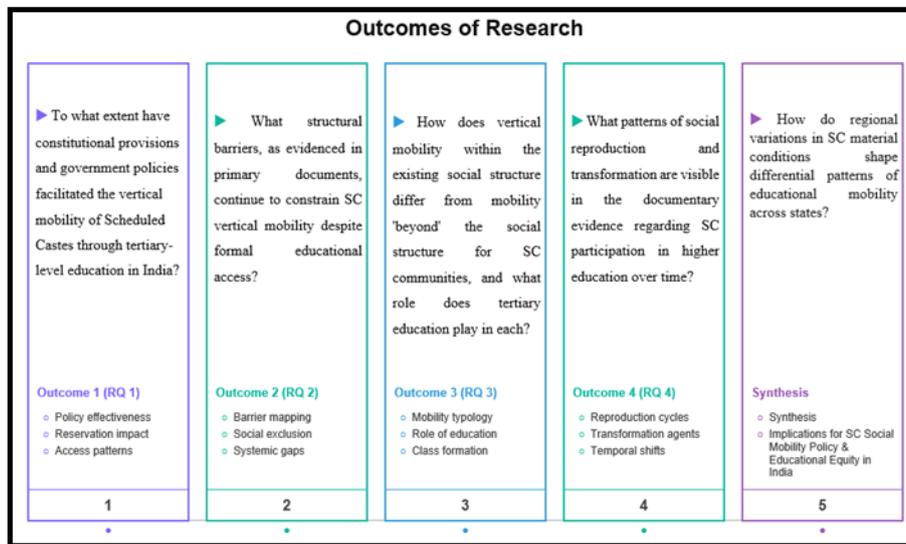


Finding 7: Vision of Mobility "Beyond" the Social Structure

The most qualitatively significant finding concerns the distinction between mobility within versus beyond the social structure. Primary source analysis of Ambedkar's writings, combined with Election Commission data and UGC faculty data, reveals a growing SC intellectual and political class that leverages educational credentials not merely for individual advancement but for advocacy, policy change, and institutional reform.



The SECC data contextualizes this finding: the emergence of SC political and intellectual leadership has occurred despite, and in response to, the structural conditions of mass SC household poverty documented in the census. Ambedkar himself exemplified this dynamic—his extraordinary educational attainment enabled him not merely to escape poverty personally but to craft constitutional protections that created the very policies (reservations, scholarships) that have since expanded SC educational access. This represents mobility that transcends the social structure's existing logic rather than merely navigating within it.



XII. Discussion

The findings of this documentary analysis illuminate a fundamental tension at the heart of SC vertical mobility through tertiary education in India. On one hand, the constitutional and policy architecture—reservations, scholarships, SC/ST Cells—has demonstrably expanded SC access to higher education and facilitated the emergence of an SC professional and middle class over seven decades of post-independence development. This represents real and significant vertical mobility within the social structure, enabling SC individuals to escape the occupational stigma of traditional caste-assigned labor and enter professional, administrative, and intellectual roles (Weisskopf, 2004).

On the other hand, the persistent attrition at higher educational levels, the concentration of SC occupational mobility in government employment, the ongoing experiences of discrimination within educational institutions, and the conversion gap between educational credentials and social recognition all indicate that tertiary education has not dissolved caste as a social institution (Béteille, 1965; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Bourdieu's (1986) framework helps explain this: the cultural capital deficit accumulated



over generations of exclusion cannot be compensated merely by formal access to institutions whose evaluative criteria are shaped by upper-caste cultural norms.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital takes on new concreteness when examined through SECC data. With 84% of SC rural households earning below Rs. 5,000 monthly, 55% landless, and the majority dependent on manual casual labour, the economic foundation for cultural capital accumulation is severely depleted. The embodied cultural capital that upper-caste students bring to tertiary institutions—developed through years of stable economic conditions, access to books and technology, educated family members—is simply not available to most SC students. This is not a deficit of aspiration but of structurally accumulated resources.

Turner's (1960) framework becomes particularly illuminating in light of SECC data. The reservation system provides sponsored access to tertiary institutions for SC students, but SECC data reveals how stark the transition to contest-mobility environments can be. An SC student from a Bihar household earning Rs. 3,000 monthly, living in kuccha single-room housing, whose parents are manual labourers without secondary education, must compete academically with students from households earning Rs. 15,000+, owning pucca multi-room homes, and with parents who are government employees or professionals. The contest environment within the institution thus exposes and amplifies, rather than neutralizes, the material disadvantages captured by SECC.

Ambedkar's (1936) vision of mobility 'beyond' the social structure—the annihilation of caste rather than accommodation within it—remains largely unrealized as a societal project, though partially manifested in the emergence of SC intellectual and political leadership that challenges caste legitimacy. The documentary evidence suggests that this more radical form of mobility, enabled by tertiary education but requiring collective organization and structural reform, represents the unfulfilled promise of educational emancipation for India's SC communities. Turner's (1960) framework suggests that as long as SC students must navigate a fundamental contradiction between sponsored access and contest-within environments, the psychological and academic costs of this structural tension will continue to produce the attrition patterns documented in AISHE data.

XIII. Conclusion

This qualitative documentary analysis has examined the vertical mobility of Scheduled Castes at the tertiary level within and beyond the existing social structure in India. The evidence drawn from constitutional provisions, government policy documents, educational statistics, and foundational theoretical texts converges on a nuanced conclusion: tertiary education has been a meaningful but structurally constrained vehicle of SC vertical mobility.

Within the social structure, higher education has enabled SC communities to achieve significant occupational mobility—particularly into government employment and public sector positions—reducing their confinement to traditionally stigmatized labor. The constitutional reservation system, scholarship schemes, and supportive

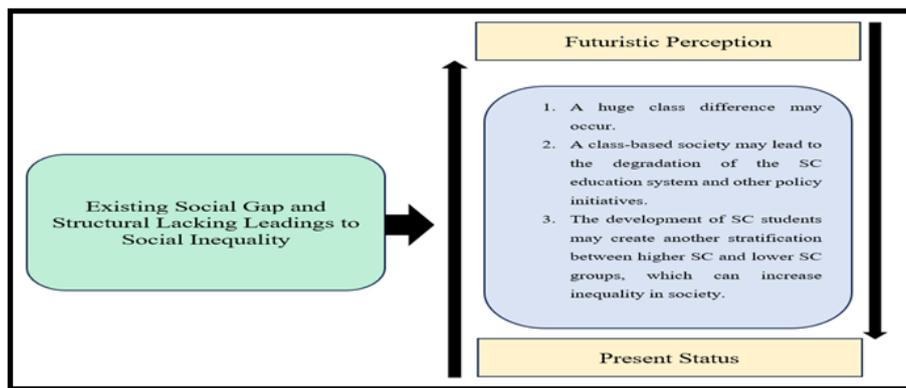


institutional mechanisms have collectively contributed to a doubling of SC enrollment in higher education within a decade (AISHE, 2022). A substantial SC professional class has emerged, representing a genuine transformation in the material conditions of a significant segment of SC communities.

Beyond the social structure, in Ambedkar's (1936) sense of transcending rather than merely navigating the caste hierarchy, the picture is more complex. Tertiary education has produced SC intellectual and political leadership that challenges caste legitimacy, contributes to legal and constitutional protections, and generates cultural and intellectual production that subverts caste-based epistemologies. Yet the caste system as a social institution persists, demonstrating the remarkable adaptability B eteille (1965) identified—absorbing economic mobility while preserving social boundaries, converting educational credentials into occupational positions while maintaining social stigma and discrimination.

The conclusion this analysis reaches is that tertiary education is a necessary but insufficient condition for SC vertical mobility—particularly for mobility that transcends the social structure. Education must be accompanied by sustained anti-discrimination enforcement, reform of institutional cultures within higher education, social capital development programs, quality equalization between institutions, and broader socioeconomic policies that address the material foundations of caste-based exclusion. The National Education Policy 2020's ambitions for inclusive excellence will remain unrealized for SC communities unless the structural dimensions of caste inequality are addressed with the same urgency as access expansion. Ambedkar's (1936) foundational insight remains as relevant as ever: the annihilation of caste requires not just individual elevation through education but collective transformation of the social structure that education alone cannot accomplish.

How existing social gaps and structural weaknesses can lead to future inequality within the Scheduled Caste (SC) community:



Huge Class Difference

A huge class difference may emerge within the SC community as education and economic opportunities increase for some individuals. While a section of SC students



benefits from higher education, professional jobs, and government employment, many others remain in conditions of poverty and limited educational access. This creates a new gap between relatively advanced SC groups and still disadvantaged SC groups, leading to internal class differentiation.

Class-Based Society and Policy Impact

As social mobility increases for some SC individuals, society may gradually shift from a pure caste hierarchy to a caste–class structure. In such a situation, policy benefits meant for SC upliftment—such as scholarships, reservations, and educational support—may be captured more by relatively better-off SC groups. This could weaken the effectiveness of the SC education system and other policy initiatives intended for the most marginalized sections.

Internal Stratification within SC

When some SC students gain higher education and social mobility, a new internal stratification may develop within the SC community itself. This may create distinctions between “higher” or more advanced SC groups and “lower” or less developed SC groups. Such internal divisions may reproduce inequality within the community and contribute to broader social inequality in society.

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