



## Inequality in transition: Rethinking caste through spatial and social mobility

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### Abstract

Caste inequality in South Asia remains a deeply entrenched social challenge, influencing access to resources, education, livelihoods, and urban opportunities. This study explores caste through the dual lenses of spatial and social mobility, emphasizing the dynamic ways in which marginalized communities navigate structural hierarchies. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from urban studies, agrarian change, cultural production, and intersectionality, the paper highlights the interconnected nature of social, economic, and spatial forms of mobility. Urban and rural spaces emerge as critical sites of inclusion and exclusion, where opportunities for upward mobility are shaped by institutional access, community networks, and historical legacies. Cultural and community practices, including creative engagement and collective resilience, are shown to provide alternative pathways for negotiating social hierarchies. Intersectional dimensions such as gender, class, and religion further mediate experiences of inequality, illustrating that mobility is relational and contingent rather than uniform. The study also underscores the symbolic and narrative dimensions of caste, showing how identity, memory, and cultural expression influence social positioning and opportunities for advancement. By synthesizing diverse theoretical insights, this research advances a multidimensional understanding of caste inequality and its evolving nature in contemporary South Asia. The findings suggest that addressing structural inequities requires integrated approaches that consider spatial, social, and cultural dynamics, offering a framework for future research, policy interventions, and community-driven strategies aimed at promoting inclusion and equitable mobility.

**Keywords:** Caste inequality, social mobility, spatial mobility, intersectionality

### Introduction

The persistence of caste-based inequality remains one of the most enduring social challenges in South Asia, intricately woven into both historical and contemporary societal structures. While legal frameworks and policy interventions have sought to address caste discrimination, the lived realities of social stratification continue to manifest through access to resources, educational opportunities, and spatial arrangements within urban and rural contexts. Understanding caste inequality requires moving beyond static conceptualizations and instead exploring the dynamic intersections of social mobility, spatial transformations, and emerging forms of urban life. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the social geographies of caste are not merely inherited but are continuously reshaped through economic processes, migration patterns, and cultural negotiations (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Barua & Sinha, 2023) [2, 5]. Urbanization, in particular, has become a critical lens through which to examine caste mobility and spatial inequality. Cities act as sites of both opportunity and exclusion, creating spaces where marginalized communities negotiate their identities, livelihoods, and social relations. The urban environment is not merely a backdrop but an active agent in structuring inequalities. Barua and Sinha (2023) [5] argue that the urban landscape is an ecological formation, where cultivated, feral, and wild spaces intertwine, shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, spatial mobility—whether through migration, relocation, or access to urban infrastructure—plays a pivotal role in enabling or constraining social mobility for lower-caste groups. This underscores the need for a relational approach to caste, one that examines how space and social hierarchies co-produce and reproduce inequalities.

Social mobility within caste hierarchies is mediated by cultural, economic, and political factors. Education, employment, and participation in civic life act as critical levers through which caste identities are renegotiated. Ahmed *et al.* (2022) [2] highlight the transformative potential of higher education for early career academics in post-pandemic contexts, emphasizing that access to institutional resources can foster both intellectual and social mobility. Similarly, Borrás Jr. *et al.* (2022) [8] note that environmental and agrarian struggles intersect with social hierarchies, suggesting that systemic inequalities are embedded in broader socio-economic and ecological frameworks. These findings underscore that mobility—spatial, social, and economic—is not a linear or uniform process; it is contingent upon multiple overlapping structures of power, privilege, and marginalization.

Cultural and communal formations further shape the contours of inequality. Studies on queer communities, gendered experiences, and religious networks illustrate that identity and belonging are negotiated within intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and gender (Dasgupta, 2023; Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2023; Krishnan, 2023) [9, 10, 15]. For instance, Dasgupta and Bakshi (2023) [9, 10] demonstrate how queer cultural initiatives in urban India create alternative spaces for community building, signaling that marginalized groups actively produce social capital and cultural resilience in response to structural exclusions. In a related vein, Gupta and Legg (2023) [13] explore communal geographies in South Asia, revealing how spatial segregation often mirrors social hierarchies, reinforcing caste-based inequalities even as communities seek pathways toward upward mobility. The postcolonial and globalized dimensions of caste inequality require attention to translocal experiences and diasporic perspectives. Terry (2023) [23] highlights how

contemporary short fiction captures the movement of individuals across “glocal” spaces, negotiating identity and belonging in contexts that bridge local and global environments. This framing is critical for understanding caste mobility, as it highlights that inequality is not confined to national boundaries but is deeply influenced by migration, global labor markets, and cultural flows. Such perspectives encourage scholars to rethink caste as a relational and dynamic construct that evolves in response to both local social hierarchies and broader structural transformations.

In sum, examining inequality through the dual lenses of spatial and social mobility allows for a richer understanding of caste as a flexible and contested social category. By focusing on the interplay between urbanization, cultural agency, and economic opportunity, contemporary research moves beyond static notions of caste to explore how marginalized communities navigate, resist, and sometimes transform structural constraints. This study, therefore, situates caste within processes of transition, seeking to illuminate pathways for mobility while critically interrogating the enduring mechanisms of exclusion that shape South Asian societies.

### Literature Review

Inequality in South Asia, particularly through the lens of caste, remains a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by historical legacies, spatial arrangements, and evolving social structures. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that understanding caste requires more than an analysis of formal hierarchies; it necessitates attention to the relational, cultural, and spatial dimensions through which inequalities are experienced and reproduced. The scholarship spanning urban studies, agrarian struggles, gender dynamics, and cultural productions provides a nuanced understanding of how caste intersects with mobility, access, and agency in contemporary contexts.

Urban environments, as Ahmed *et al.* (2022) <sup>[2]</sup> note, have become central to examining social mobility and inequality, particularly for early career academics navigating post-pandemic realities. Urban spaces are not neutral; they actively shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Barua and Sinha (2023) <sup>[5]</sup> conceptualize the urban as an ecological formation where cultivated, feral, and wild spaces coexist, highlighting that access to urban resources and opportunities is unevenly distributed along social hierarchies. Dyson and Jeffrey (2022) <sup>[11]</sup> extend this perspective to rural-urban interfaces, demonstrating that selective urbanism in rural North India produces fragmented opportunities and constrains mobility for marginalized communities. These studies underscore that spatial mobility—movement across neighborhoods, cities, or regions—is intricately tied to social mobility, yet often constrained by structural inequalities linked to caste, class, and gender.

The postcolonial context further complicates the dynamics of inequality. Becker *et al.* (2023) <sup>[7]</sup> highlight methodological, ethical, and practical challenges in researching historical legacies, such as the aftermath of slavery in East Africa, emphasizing that historical injustices leave long-standing imprints on contemporary social hierarchies. Similarly, Borrás Jr. *et al.* (2022) <sup>[8]</sup> argue that agrarian struggles intersect with climate change and broader socio-economic pressures, illustrating that structural inequalities are not merely residual but actively reproduced

in material and environmental contexts. Scoones (2021) <sup>[19]</sup> reinforces this by showing that agrarian change, pastoralism, and resource access in rural areas are deeply shaped by historical legacies and institutional arrangements, suggesting that caste, class, and livelihood insecurities are intertwined.

Cultural and identity-based dimensions of inequality have received increasing attention in recent literature. Dasgupta (2023) <sup>[9, 10]</sup> and Dasgupta and Bakshi (2023) <sup>[9, 10]</sup> explore the experiences of queer communities in Indian cities, showing how precarious cultural work, community networks, and creative resilience provide pathways for navigating systemic exclusion. These studies illustrate that marginalized groups actively negotiate spaces of belonging, challenging dominant hierarchies even while contending with persistent structural constraints. Gupta and Legg (2023) <sup>[13]</sup> similarly highlight communal geographies, emphasizing that spatial segregation often mirrors social hierarchies, reinforcing caste-based disparities even as individuals and communities seek avenues for upward mobility. Krishnan (2023) <sup>[15]</sup> contributes to this discussion by examining Christian internationalism and young womanhood in South India, revealing how faith, gender, and social networks interact to shape opportunities for social advancement in hierarchical contexts.

Intersectionality offers a critical methodological lens for understanding the complex interplay of caste, gender, and spatial inequality. Sircar (2022) <sup>[22]</sup> reflects on the application of autoethnography to geographic research, demonstrating that intersectional frameworks can reveal the nuanced ways in which overlapping social identities influence lived experiences and access to resources. Similarly, Aruldoss and Nolas (2019) <sup>[4]</sup> focus on Indian girls’ embodied orientations toward public life, illustrating how gendered socialization intersects with spatial constraints to produce differentiated access to education and civic participation. Sen (2021) <sup>[20]</sup> emphasizes the role of class and gender in shaping participation in trade unions in Bengal, highlighting that social mobility and agency are contingent on multiple structural and relational factors. Mandakathinal (2021) <sup>[16]</sup> further illustrates how gender roles in martial arts practices are influenced by historical and cultural frameworks, pointing to the ways in which spatial and social mobility are constrained by entrenched norms.

Education and socialization are also critical pathways for negotiating inequality. Naveed and Arnot (2019) <sup>[18]</sup> underscore that family-schooling relations and the polyphonic voices of marginalized communities reveal how educational experiences mediate access to social and economic mobility. Adams *et al.* (2019) <sup>[1]</sup> extend this by emphasizing the potential of social medicine approaches to reimagine health and well-being as socially embedded phenomena, illustrating the broader societal structures that influence opportunities for mobility. Morrison (2015) <sup>[17]</sup> adds an archaeological perspective, demonstrating how historical water landscapes in Southern India continue to shape access to resources and community resilience, highlighting that spatial inequalities have deep temporal roots.

Precarity and livelihood insecurity remain persistent challenges in understanding mobility and inequality. Wilson and Dashper (2023) <sup>[24]</sup> explore high-altitude mountaineering tourism, showing how precarious

livelihoods intersect with spatial and social marginalization. Ejiofor (2022) <sup>[12]</sup> examines pastoralism and terrorism in Nigeria, providing comparative insights into how insecurity and resource scarcity constrain mobility and exacerbate vulnerability. Sharma *et al.* (2021) <sup>[21]</sup> further demonstrate that relational approaches to poverty, encompassing social, ecological, and technical dynamics, offer a nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities persist and evolve over time. Bear (2013) <sup>[6]</sup> explores economic governance in industrial contexts, highlighting that opacity and instability in institutional frameworks shape the possibilities for upward mobility and economic security.

Literature on memory, culture, and postcolonial identity highlights the symbolic dimensions of inequality. Ang (2021) <sup>[3]</sup> examines transnational re-memorialization, showing how cultural memory interacts with spatial and social positioning. Terry (2023) <sup>[23]</sup> investigates “glocal” homes in contemporary short fiction, highlighting how narratives of mobility and belonging illuminate the negotiation of identity across local and global contexts. Herklotz (2017) <sup>[14]</sup> examines the intersections of law, religion, and gender equality in India, emphasizing the ways in which formal institutional arrangements interact with social hierarchies to constrain access and opportunity.

Collectively, these studies illustrate that caste inequality and social mobility cannot be understood in isolation from spatial, cultural, and structural dimensions. Mobility—whether social, economic, or spatial—is contingent upon historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and cultural practices. Urbanization, ecological change, gendered norms, and cultural production all intersect to shape the possibilities for upward mobility while simultaneously reproducing structural constraints. Understanding inequality in transition thus requires an integrated framework that considers the relational and spatial dimensions of caste, the agency of marginalized communities, and the enduring structural forces that constrain mobility. This literature review situates the current study within this evolving scholarly landscape, highlighting the importance of exploring caste through the dual lenses of social and spatial mobility to uncover both the pathways and barriers to equality in contemporary South Asia.

Building upon prior scholarship, the dynamics of caste inequality cannot be disentangled from processes of economic change, migration, and globalization. Urbanization and selective infrastructure development shape not only spatial mobility but also social hierarchies in complex ways. Ahmed *et al.* (2022) <sup>[2]</sup> highlight that post-pandemic transformations in higher education underscore how access to institutional resources mediates social and professional mobility, particularly for early-career academics. Similarly, Dyson and Jeffrey (2022) <sup>[11]</sup> illustrate that rural-urban linkages in North India produce fragmented urbanization, where infrastructural interventions selectively benefit certain communities while leaving marginalized populations spatially and socially excluded. These findings suggest that structural inequalities are reinforced through spatial configurations, even as urban spaces theoretically offer avenues for mobility.

The intersection of caste with gender and religion further complicates the landscape of mobility. Krishnan (2023) <sup>[15]</sup> shows that young women navigating Christian internationalist networks in South India experience both opportunities and constraints shaped by intersecting

hierarchies of caste, gender, and faith. Mandakathinal (2021) <sup>[16]</sup> similarly emphasizes that gendered practices in martial arts, such as Kalaripayattu, reflect broader cultural norms that both enable and restrict mobility. Such studies underscore the importance of intersectional approaches in understanding the varied experiences of marginalized communities, highlighting that caste inequality is not monolithic but contingent upon overlapping social structures.

Cultural production, creative labor, and community engagement provide additional insights into how marginalized groups negotiate inequality. Dasgupta and Bakshi (2023) <sup>[9, 10]</sup> reveal that queer film festivals in Kolkata create alternative spaces for community-building, cultural expression, and precarious economic engagement. These spaces facilitate social recognition and enable mobility in contexts where formal institutions often fail to provide equitable opportunities. Terry (2023) <sup>[23]</sup> and Ang (2021) <sup>[3]</sup> further illustrate that narratives, literature, and transnational memory practices shape perceptions of identity and belonging, demonstrating that symbolic and cultural dimensions are central to understanding caste and social mobility.

Ecological and agrarian studies also illuminate structural constraints on mobility. Borrás Jr. *et al.* (2022) <sup>[8]</sup> and Scoones (2021) <sup>[19]</sup> highlight that agrarian struggles, environmental change, and resource scarcity reinforce hierarchical patterns of access and exclusion. Sharma *et al.* (2021) <sup>[21]</sup> extend this argument by emphasizing relational approaches to poverty, demonstrating how social, ecological, and technical dynamics converge to shape opportunities for advancement. Wilson and Dashper (2023) <sup>[24]</sup> similarly document the precariousness of livelihoods in high-altitude tourism, indicating that economic precarity intersects with spatial marginalization to produce vulnerability.

Pastoralist and rural communities offer additional perspectives on structural inequality. Ejiofor (2022) <sup>[12]</sup> examines how interactions between pastoralism and security threats in Nigeria constrain mobility, illustrating parallels in how marginalized communities globally negotiate environmental and political constraints. Bear (2013) <sup>[6]</sup> similarly emphasizes that institutional opacity and economic instability in industrial contexts shape opportunities for upward mobility, highlighting that structural governance factors are critical in reproducing inequalities.

Finally, literature on law, health, and social medicine underscores the embeddedness of inequality within formal and informal institutions. Herklotz (2017) <sup>[14]</sup> examines the interplay of law, religion, and gender equality in India, showing that institutional frameworks interact with social hierarchies to reinforce disparities. Adams *et al.* (2019) <sup>[1]</sup> demonstrate that health interventions grounded in social medicine must consider social determinants and structural inequalities to be effective, further reinforcing that mobility is mediated by multi-layered structural factors.

Collectively, these studies indicate that caste inequality is not merely a static social structure but a dynamic process shaped by spatial, social, cultural, and economic forces. Mobility—whether through urbanization, education, livelihood engagement, or cultural practice—is contingent upon intersecting hierarchies, institutional access, and relational networks. A comprehensive understanding of caste in transition requires integrating perspectives from

urban studies, intersectionality, cultural production, and ecological and economic analysis to capture the multifaceted nature of inequality and the pathways through which marginalized communities navigate structural constraints.

### Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical and conceptual research design to examine caste inequality through the lenses of spatial and social mobility in contemporary South Asia. Unlike empirical or data-driven analyses, this research focuses on synthesizing existing scholarly literature, theoretical frameworks, and critical perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic processes through which caste hierarchies are reproduced and challenged. The study relies on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports that address urbanization, social mobility, cultural practices, gender, and economic inequalities. Key texts include works on urban studies, agrarian change, cultural production, and intersectionality, which collectively inform the conceptual framework for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of caste inequality (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Borras Jr. *et al.*, 2022; Barua & Sinha, 2023; Dasgupta, 2023) [2, 5, 8, 9, 10].

The methodological approach involves a critical literature review, identifying patterns, themes, and debates within the scholarship, and linking them to the conceptual questions of caste, mobility, and spatial inequality. This approach enables the researcher to interrogate structural, social, and cultural dimensions of inequality while highlighting areas of contestation and emerging perspectives. Intersectionality and spatial analysis serve as guiding lenses to examine how caste interacts with gender, class, and urban-rural dynamics in shaping social outcomes (Sircar, 2022; Gupta & Legg, 2023) [13, 22].

### Objectives of the Study

- To explore theoretical perspectives on caste inequality and social mobility in South Asia.
- To analyze the relationship between spatial dynamics, urbanization, and caste-based exclusion.
- To examine the role of cultural, gendered, and community practices in facilitating or constraining mobility.
- To identify conceptual gaps and propose directions for future research on caste and inequality.

By situating caste inequality within broader social, spatial, and cultural frameworks, this research aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of mobility and inclusion in hierarchical societies (Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022; Terry, 2023) [11, 23].

### Discussion

Theoretical perspectives on caste inequality reveal that social hierarchies in South Asia are deeply entrenched, yet dynamic, shaped by historical legacies, economic structures, and cultural practices. Ahmed *et al.* (2022) [2] emphasize the transformative potential of urban environments for early career academics in post-pandemic contexts, highlighting how access to institutional resources can facilitate mobility. Similarly, Barua and Sinha (2023) [5] conceptualize urban spaces as ecological formations, where access to resources and opportunities is unevenly distributed along social

hierarchies, reflecting the intersection of spatial and social mobility. These insights suggest that urbanization is not merely a backdrop but an active agent in reproducing or mitigating caste-based inequalities.

Spatial dynamics also intersect with agrarian and ecological challenges. Borras Jr. *et al.* (2022) [8] and Scoones (2021) [19] demonstrate that agrarian struggles, resource access, and environmental change reinforce structural inequalities in rural areas, constraining upward mobility for marginalized communities. Dyson and Jeffrey (2022) [11] note that selective urbanism in rural North India fragments opportunities, emphasizing that mobility is contingent upon both spatial location and institutional access. These findings underscore the importance of examining mobility through both urban and rural contexts to understand the nuanced processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Cultural and community practices further shape mobility pathways. Dasgupta (2023) [9, 10] and Dasgupta and Bakshi (2023) [9, 10] highlight how queer communities in Indian cities create alternative spaces for social and cultural engagement, demonstrating agency in navigating structural exclusion. Gupta and Legg (2023) [13] similarly illustrate how communal geographies reproduce social hierarchies while offering sites for negotiation and resistance. Krishnan (2023) [15] and Sircar (2022) [22] emphasize the role of intersectionality, showing how gender, religion, and social networks interact with caste to mediate opportunities and constrain social mobility.

Finally, literary and postcolonial perspectives illuminate the symbolic dimensions of inequality. Terry (2023) [23] explores “glocal” narratives, highlighting how identity, belonging, and mobility are negotiated across local and global contexts. Ang (2021) [3] demonstrates that transnational memory practices shape social positioning and opportunities, emphasizing the relational nature of mobility and inequality. These theoretical insights collectively illustrate that caste inequality is not static; it is continuously negotiated through spatial, cultural, and social processes. Understanding these dynamics requires integrating urban studies, agrarian change, intersectionality, and cultural analysis to capture the complex mechanisms that enable or constrain mobility in hierarchical societies.

### Major Findings

**Urban spaces act as both enablers and constraints of mobility:** Access to resources, infrastructure, and institutional support in cities facilitates upward mobility for some, but entrenched social hierarchies continue to limit opportunities for marginalized caste groups (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Barua & Sinha, 2023) [2, 5].

**Spatial inequality mirrors social hierarchies:** Fragmented urbanization and selective development in rural and peri-urban areas reproduce structural exclusion, constraining social and economic mobility for lower-caste communities (Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022) [11].

**Cultural and community practices provide alternative pathways:** Marginalized groups, including queer communities, leverage cultural spaces, creative work, and community networks to negotiate social inclusion and agency (Dasgupta, 2023; Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2023) [9, 10].

**Intersectionality shapes mobility outcomes:** Gender, religion, and class intersect with caste to mediate access to education, employment, and civic participation, revealing complex barriers to social mobility (Krishnan, 2023; Sircar, 2022) <sup>[15, 22]</sup>.

**Historical legacies continue to influence inequality:** Postcolonial and historical structures, including agrarian hierarchies and institutional biases, shape contemporary patterns of caste-based exclusion and limit upward mobility (Borras Jr. *et al.*, 2022; Scoones, 2021) <sup>[8, 19]</sup>.

**Rural-urban dynamics are critical for understanding mobility:** Migration, urbanization, and selective urban policies create uneven opportunities for social advancement, linking spatial relocation to potential social mobility (Barua & Sinha, 2023; Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022) <sup>[5, 11]</sup>.

**Symbolic and cultural dimensions of mobility matter:** Literature, narratives, and transnational memory practices influence social positioning and identity, highlighting the relational and negotiated nature of caste and mobility (Terry, 2023; Ang, 2021) <sup>[3, 23]</sup>.

**Access to institutional and educational resources is pivotal:** Higher education, skill development, and institutional support serve as critical levers for challenging caste-based inequalities (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Naveed & Arnot, 2019) <sup>[2, 18]</sup>.

**Mobility is multidimensional and contingent:** Social, spatial, economic, and cultural forms of mobility are interlinked, yet contingent upon structural, ecological, and relational factors, emphasizing that caste inequality is dynamic rather than static (Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Bear, 2013) <sup>[6, 21]</sup>.

## Conclusion

This study highlights that caste inequality in South Asia is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by historical legacies, spatial arrangements, cultural practices, and intersecting social identities. The analysis demonstrates that mobility—whether social, economic, or spatial—is not uniform; it is mediated by urbanization, access to institutional resources, community networks, and cultural engagement. Urban and rural environments act as both sites of opportunity and exclusion, where structural hierarchies reproduce inequalities even as marginalized communities negotiate alternative pathways through agency and resilience (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Barua & Sinha, 2023; Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022) <sup>[2, 5, 11]</sup>. Cultural and intersectional perspectives reveal that gender, religion, class, and identity intersect with caste to shape access to education, livelihoods, and civic participation, emphasizing the relational nature of inequality (Dasgupta, 2023; Krishnan, 2023; Sircar, 2022) <sup>[9, 10, 15, 22]</sup>.

Historical and ecological factors further underscore the persistence of caste-based disadvantage. Agrarian struggles, selective urbanism, and resource inequities demonstrate that structural constraints are deeply entrenched and require comprehensive, multidimensional approaches to address. The theoretical synthesis also highlights the importance of symbolic and cultural practices, including literature, memory, and creative engagement, in mediating social

positioning and creating spaces for mobility (Terry, 2023; Ang, 2021) <sup>[3, 23]</sup>.

The findings indicate that addressing caste inequality demands attention to both structural reforms and community-driven agency. Future research could focus on empirical studies exploring the lived experiences of marginalized groups, particularly examining how urbanization, migration, and policy interventions influence social mobility. Comparative studies across rural, urban, and transnational contexts would further enrich understanding of the dynamic interplay between caste, space, and mobility. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches integrating urban studies, cultural analysis, and intersectional frameworks could illuminate pathways for inclusion and equity, providing actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and community organizations. By bridging theoretical insights with practical implications, future studies can contribute to a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of caste and mobility in contemporary South Asia.

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