

Social Mobility in India: Determinants and Recommendations for Change

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ABSTRACT Social mobility reveals the degree to which an individual's starting point in life determines their chances in the future, and therefore the extent to which talent is rewarded with opportunity. A stronger association between one's starting point and their outcomes in adulthood, indicates lower social mobility and less meritocracy. For India, realising the potential of its population will be a key driver of progress and growth. This brief explores the most recent evidence around income and occupation mobility in India and provides recommendations for increasing social mobility and equality of opportunity.

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INTRODUCTION

Social mobility is the extent to which people are able to move between socio-economic strata during their lifetime and between generations.^a In societies with low social mobility, individual outcomes are strongly determined by their starting point in life. That is, children from privileged backgrounds tend to grow up to be privileged themselves in terms of education, income, wealth and occupation; on the other hand, children from poor families tend to grow up poor themselves. Low social mobility not only erodes the foundation of growth, it also reduces well-being and puts social cohesion and democratic participation at risk.¹ In societies with high social mobility, individual life chances are not strongly determined by where you come from or who your parents are.² In high-mobility societies, children from less well-off backgrounds will have the same chances of achieving their aspirations as those from more advantaged upbringings. Measures of social mobility capture the persistence of individual positions over time, and the extent to which people can escape those positions.

The concept of social mobility is important to the study of societies because it is suggestive of equality of opportunity: the idea that while everyone will not have the same outcomes, they should have the same opportunities. Increasing equality of opportunity means addressing the many layers of disadvantage faced by different groups within a population. Increasing social mobility is not only an argument for equality; it is an economic case as well: promoting equality of opportunity is

essential for economic efficiency as it enhances the use of individual talents.

This brief examines the state of social mobility in India. The succeeding section describes income and occupation mobility in the country. The brief will then outline a set of recommendations for increasing social mobility in India, including improving geographic mobility, promoting equality in education, adapting social protections, investing in youth, and holding companies accountable.

INCOME AND OCCUPATION MOBILITY IN INDIA

There are different concepts of mobility that have been described by sociologists and economists that are generally accepted as universal. *Absolute* mobility refers to whether and by how much children are better off than their parents.³ *Relative* mobility, on the other hand, looks at whether offspring are better off than their parents in terms of their position in the distribution: Have children moved up or down the ladder compared to the position of their parents? *Intragenerational* mobility refers to changes in one's position during their lifetime, while *intergenerational* mobility focuses on whether class and income positions are passed on across generations.⁴

Measuring social mobility is a task that demands intensive use of data, particularly in the study of *intergenerational* mobility which requires long panel data on parents' outcomes and those of their children. Indeed, in many countries, data constraints make these measures impossible.^b This brief presents

a See for example: Breen, Richard, "Social mobility in Europe," Oxford university Press, Oxford.

b See recent review of evidence and methodological issues in developing countries: Black, S., and P. Devereux, "Recent Developments in Intergenerational Mobility," Handbook of Labor Economics, 4(B), Ch-16, (2011): 1487- 1541.

findings on relative intergenerational income and occupation mobility in India. A fundamental issue that has not been sufficiently addressed in existing literature is the inclusion of women and daughters in mobility analysis. Current studies in India only include the outcomes of fathers and sons, which is why the estimates quoted in this paper focus on males.

INTERGENERATIONAL INCOME MOBILITY

‘Intergenerational income mobility’ is the association between the income of parents and that of their children when they grow up. This measure helps create an understanding of how independent (or not) child outcomes are from those of their parents, in turn revealing the level of fairness and meritocracy in society.⁵

There are various methodological approaches to the study of intergenerational income mobility. Addressing data constraints is a particular challenge to the proper examination of incomes and earnings. This brief builds on the findings of a study published in 2013 in the *Journal of Human Resources*, which assesses income mobility in India. The study draws on five successive rounds of the National Sample Survey (NSS).⁶ The authors use three different established measures of income mobility.^c They compute, for example, transition probabilities of child (i.e., son) incomes based on the income quintile of their parents (i.e., fathers). Table 1 summarises the transition probabilities for each of the income quintiles for the most recent cohort. This is done for both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST), and Non-SC/ST.^d

Table 1: Intergenerational Income Transition Probabilities 2004-05

Parent/ Offspring	Non-SC/ST					SC/ST				
	q1	q2	q3	q4	q5	q1	q2	q3	q4	q5
q1	0.52 (0.03)	0.33 (0.03)	0.08 (0.02)	0.04 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.58 (0.04)	0.33 (0.04)	0.03 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
q2	0.15 (0.03)	0.40 (0.04)	0.34 (0.05)	0.06 (0.02)	0.05 (0.01)	0.15 (0.03)	0.32 (0.05)	0.42 (0.05)	0.05 (0.01)	0.06 (0.03)
q3	0.07 (0.01)	0.15 (0.03)	0.35 (0.05)	0.35 (0.05)	0.08 (0.02)	0.07 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.34 (0.05)	0.45 (0.05)	0.06 (0.02)
q4	0.09 (0.02)	0.12 (0.02)	0.11 (0.02)	0.35 (0.04)	0.32 (0.03)	0.09 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.11 (0.02)	0.34 (0.04)	0.41 (0.04)
q5	0.11 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.09 (0.01)	0.18 (0.03)	0.54 (0.03)	0.11 (0.03)	0.11 (0.03)	0.10 (0.02)	0.16 (0.02)	0.52 (0.04)

Source: Hnatkovska et al. 2012. P.25. Note: Each cell reports the probability (for the 2004-2005 NSS survey round) of a household head with income in quintile 1 having his child earning income in quintile 5: q1-q5 refer to the quintile of the generational income distribution (fathers in the columns; kids in the rows). Bootstrapped standard errors are in parenthesis.

- c See their paper for details on their methodological approaches and data constraints.
- d Because of the inequities of the caste system, the lowest castes and tribes were protected in the Indian constitution and by affirmative action measures. These measures were meant to be temporary, to reduce inequality and level the playing field, but they are still in effect.

For a child whose parent's income is in the bottom quintile (20 percent), the probability of reaching the top quintile is a low 3 percent. (See Table 1.) That means children of the poorest 20 percent of households have a 3 percent chance of ending up in the highest income quintile themselves. Meanwhile, 52 percent of children born to parents in the bottom income quintile will also likely not be able to move up the ladder and will end up in the lowest quintile.⁷ At the same time, 54 percent of children born to parents in the top income quintile will end up in the highest income quintile themselves. Similarly, amongst SCs/STs, 2 percent of those born to parents in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution could end up in the highest income quintile themselves. More than half (58 percent) of children born to parents in the lowest income quintile are also likely to end up in the lowest income quintile.⁸

Another common measure of mobility is intergenerational wage elasticities, which reveal how much children's incomes correlate with those of their parents. The higher the estimate, the greater the association between incomes, and the less social mobility there is. Between the earliest cohort (1983) and the latest cohort (2004-5) there have been patterns of declining intergenerational wage elasticities, implying more social mobility.⁹ The SCs/STs saw a decline from 0.90 to 0.55 between 1983 and 2004-5, and for non-SCs/STs, the drop was from 0.73 to 0.61 during the same period. While this decline is significant, intergenerational income persistence remains high compared to other countries. The average income elasticity in India's South Asian neighbourhood is 0.49, and in China it is 0.50.¹⁰ The intergenerational wage elasticity in the United States, a country widely acknowledged as having low social mobility is 0.4.¹¹ The OECD

average is 0.38.¹² Among high-income countries overall, the average income elasticity is 0.35.¹³

INTERGENERATIONAL OCCUPATION MOBILITY

Occupation mobility is the relationship between occupation origins (or parents' occupation) and destinations (individual occupation outcomes). Occupations have some methodological advantages over the study of income and earnings mobility and reveal the degree to which individual talents are rewarded with opportunities.¹⁴ Occupation mobility is particularly relevant in India because the caste system has strong occupation affiliations. How likely is it that the child of a manual laborer could end up in a white-collar profession? Conversely, what are the chances that children born to white-collar professionals end up in manual labor? These questions help us to understand the ways in which occupation, class and caste positions are passed from one generation to another.

Azam and colleagues analysed occupation mobility between men born in 1945 and 1984 in India using the Indian Human Development Survey (IDHS).¹⁵ The authors aggregated occupations into four categories: white collar, skilled/semi-skilled, unskilled, and farmers. Amongst sons born to fathers with white-collar jobs in the 1945-54 cohort, 53.4 percent also ended up in white-collar jobs. (See Table 2.) By the most recent cohort (those born in 1984) this number declined to 39.3 percent, indicating a decline in occupational persistence during this period. Yet, in the latest cohort, 78 percent of sons born to white-collar fathers ended up in white-collar or skilled/semi-skilled occupations.¹⁶ Moreover, 58.5 percent of

Table 2: Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in India, 1945-54 and 1975-1984 Cohorts

Son's birth cohort 1945-1954					Son's birth cohort 1975-1984			
Father's Occupation					Father's Occupation			
Son's Occupation	White Collar	Skilled/Semi-skilled	Unskilled	Farmers	White Collar	Skilled/Semi-skilled	Unskilled	Farmers
White Collar	53.4	20.8	8.9	9.1	39.3	10.0	4.9	6.4
Skilled/Semi-skilled	31.6	62.7	27.3	21.7	38.7	71.9	29.6	28.4
Unskilled	9.3	12.4	52.8	25.3	9.9	10.9	58.5	27.3
Farmers	5.7	4.1	11.0	43.9	12.2	7.3	7.0	37.9

Source: Azam, 2013. P. 15.

children born to unskilled workers, also ended up in unskilled professions.

In the earlier cohort, 9.1 percent of sons born to farmers ended up in white-collar jobs, and 8.9 percent of unskilled workers ended up in white-collar jobs. In the most recent cohort (those born in 1984), these numbers dropped to 6.4 and 4.9 percent, respectively—meaning that just 6.4 percent of children born to farmers ended up in white-collar occupations.

Further, only 4.9 percent of children born to unskilled workers ended up in white-collar jobs. Meanwhile, 71 percent of children born to skilled/semi-skilled workers also ended up in skilled/semi-skilled occupations (See Table 2.)¹⁷

In a separate study, Iverson and colleagues drew on the IDHS to construct an occupational classification scheme based on the skill intensity of different occupations in India (See Table 3).^e

Table 3: Occupational Categories

Category 6	Professional (Codes 00-29)
Category 5	Clerical and other (Codes 30-39, 40-42, 44-48)
Category 4	Farmers (Codes 60-62)
Category 3	Higher status vocational occupations (Codes 43, 49, 50-52, 56-59, 79, 84-87)
Category 2	Lower status vocational occupations (Codes 53-55, 68, 71-78, 80-83, 88-93, 96-98)
Category 1	Agricultural and other manual laborers including construction workers (Codes 63-67, 94, 95, 99)

^e Cross-country comparisons in occupation mobility are more difficult than income and earnings, as the occupational classification schemes used to create mobility tables differ between countries.

Table 4: Occupational Mobility Matrices

	Agricultural and other Laborers	Lower Skilled Occupations	Higher Skilled Occupations	Farmers	Clerical and Other Workers	Professionals
Agricultural and other laborers	58.6	13.6	8.0	5.3	10.1	4.5
Lower Skilled Occupations	14.6	50.0	11.3	2.5	12.8	8.8
Higher Skilled occupations	11.5	15.4	42.5	4.0	15.3	11.3
Farmers	32.2	9.7	7.7	3.4	10.7	7.4
Clerical and Other Workers	7.4	12.0	14.7	3.8	48.1	14.0
Professionals	8.9	9.0	14.1	6.5	23.9	37.6

Source: Iversen et al. 2016, P. 10. Note: All India, rural and urban are combined.

The authors found that 58.6 percent of individuals born to agricultural workers also ended up in agricultural and manual labour occupations. Similarly, 37.6 percent of those born to professionals, also ended up in professional occupations. Notably, however, there is significantly higher mobility in urban areas than rural areas. For instance, just 10.5 percent of sons born to an agricultural worker in rural areas ended up in clerical and other occupations, compared to 26.8 percent in urban areas.¹⁸

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Current measurements of social mobility in India suggest that intergenerational persistence in both incomes and occupations remain: few children from low-income families will likely grow up to have incomes at the top of the distribution. Similarly, few children from disadvantaged backgrounds will end up in professional and high-skilled occupations. The

implications of this are far-reaching, as it means that India is unable to harness the abilities and talents of the population.

The Indian context presents unique challenges for social mobility. This brief offers the following recommendations for increasing social mobility in India, with the goal of creating more equality of opportunity.

1. Increase Geographic Mobility

Labour migration is important for economic growth as it allows for the efficient allocation of talent across regions and states, as well as industries. While nearly 30 percent of India's population are considered internal migrants, just 14.7 percent of these internal migrants cite work as their reason for moving; among female migrants, only two percent moved for work.¹⁹ Internal migration in India is typically short-distance, with people moving *within* districts and states rather than across state borders. At

the same time, India is still urbanising, with 34 percent of the population living in cities, compared to 55 percent of the global population.²⁰

One barrier to longer-distance and interstate migration is that social benefits are issued and administered at the state level. Loss of access to such protections is a disincentive for people who may otherwise have decided to move to another state for better opportunities. Moreover, government jobs that are highly sought-after, tend to have long state residency requirements, making internal migrants ineligible for many desirable positions.²¹ At the same time, many universities and higher education institutions favour in-state residents in the admissions process, making university attendance in one's place of origin more attractive. Moreover, internal migrants often face integration challenges and discrimination in their place of destination.

It is not realistic to expect everyone to move to find a job, but the distribution of economic prospects across India are not equal. Policies designed to create local employment should be coupled with others that support people who want to move for better employment and education opportunities. Policies on internal migration should be mainstreamed into labour market policies as well as those on urban planning, environmental protection and development. Further, positive political discourse around migration is needed to help increase geographic and social mobility.²²

2. Improve Equality in Education

Education is often considered one of the most important factors influencing social mobility.

²³ The socioeconomic status of one's parents, however, greatly determines education and learning opportunities. Children who belong to more advantaged families tend to have greater access to high-quality education. There are also disparities in learning outcomes. Meanwhile, a college degree is increasingly needed to gain access to desirable jobs in dynamic sectors in India, but university degrees remain out of reach for many.

To harness the equalising potential of education, India must increase investments in quality, affordable and accessible early childhood education. Experts in pedagogy have long argued that achievement gaps start at birth, persist throughout early childhood, and have long-term negative consequences.²⁴ A British study has found that addressing gaps in learning opportunities and outcomes amongst children at a young age have multiple benefits, including a reduction in the persistence of learning disparities, improved cognitive and non-cognitive development amongst children, and increasing female labour force participation.²⁵

Indeed, many countries have made strides towards closing the achievement gap through investment in early childhood education.²⁶ In addition, new pathways for higher education attainment are needed, particularly amongst the disadvantaged.²⁷ Innovative approaches to higher education admissions, for instance, to increase access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds are being tested and implemented elsewhere; these offer potential templates for universities in India.²⁸ Finally, more entry points are needed for recognised educational institutions for people who are entering or re-entering education later in life.

3. Invest in Youth

India has a growing youth population. Ensuring that they have desirable education and economic opportunities will be a defining challenge and key driver of the country's progress and growth. When 5,764 youth across India were asked what they thought would have the most impact in addressing gaps in youth aspirations and job market realities, 51 percent reported increased mentorship and career counseling.²⁹ One-third (30 percent) of the respondents reported not having access to such services.³⁰ It is necessary to integrate career counselling and mentorship programmes into existing government schemes, and into the education system, in general.

When more than 700 Indian companies were asked about their hiring practices, they ranked education attainment and years of work experience as the most important factors that they consider among applicants.³¹ At the same time, the youth report a lack of work experience as a major barrier that they face in finding desirable jobs.³² High-quality, paid internships and apprenticeship opportunities are indispensable in helping youth from across socio-economic backgrounds gain practical work experience.³³ ORF's research suggests that remuneration is a determining factor for youth in participating in such initiatives.³⁴ Moreover, mandatory compensation for internships and apprenticeships will help to reduce inequality in access, as the opportunity costs for participating in such programmes are often too high for youth from low-income backgrounds.

The same ORF study also indicates that companies do not struggle with employability of first-time job seekers in India. In fact, companies value work experience and education more than technical and job-related skills. This points to a potential value in shifting government focus and resources away from job-related skills initiatives.

Finally, rather than creating a dual education system that filters youth into *academic* and *non-academic* pathways – which only tends to increase inequality—programmes that create new career pathways for youth from less advantaged backgrounds are needed. For example, an initiative that recruits young people from poor families into public-sector jobs could be implemented.

4. Adapt Social Protections to Realities

Social protection measures can reduce the risks associated with sickness and healthcare, unemployment and injury, parental responsibilities, poverty, and social exclusion.³⁵ Social protections are critical for social mobility as they protect people against the negative consequences of income shocks. Moreover, they can prevent downward mobility, particularly amongst the poor.

To realise the benefits of social protections in enhancing social mobility, these schemes need to be adapted to the realities of the population, now and for the future. Informality is a key characteristic of the Indian workforce, and companies are increasingly hiring temporary and contractual workers. These dual realities are compounded by the rising share of workers that are engaging

digitally enabled work in the gig economy.^f Under current social protection frameworks in India, these realities leave large segments of society uncovered by key social protections. Linking protections to individuals rather than employers is one needed step; another would be to address the specific needs of digital and remote workers.

At the same time, social protections can play an important role in supporting individuals facing additional risks or burdens such as childcare, other care work, or health-related constraints. Social protections can reduce the short-term risk of poverty, increase long-term earnings by reducing the loss of work experience, and reduce the likelihood of working and being trapped in low-income jobs.³⁶ Examples of such protections are sufficient paternity and maternity leave, paid sick leave, and unemployment insurance.

5. Leverage Corporate Responsibility

Research has found that Indian companies are rife with biases in hiring, promotions, wages, transfers, and terminations, based on gender, age, caste, education, marital status and region of origin.³⁷ These companies have an important role to play in increasing social mobility in India, and the government should derive greater accountability from them. One potential step is for companies to adopt blind-hiring practices where the individual characteristics of an applicant are hidden. A study in Spain, for instance, found that female candidates were 30 percent less likely to be called for an interview than male candidates

with identical characteristics.³⁸ Moreover, high-level positions tend to be the domain of certain sub-groups, with entry into these positions being nearly impossible for many. For example, only 17 percent of senior-level roles in business are held by women in India.³⁹ Companies need dedicated strategies for ensuring career progression and promotion amongst less privileged staff. Implementing in-house diversity task forces and diversity policies are one policy option for firms.⁴⁰ For the state, mandatory quotas for senior management and the boardroom should be considered, as well as mandatory reporting of gender wage gaps as has been done elsewhere.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

This brief presented the most recent available estimates of income and occupation mobility in India. The results indicate that while progress has been achieved over the years, social mobility in India remains low. India must address the specific policy areas that constrain equal access to opportunities.

The most urgent measures are the following: 1) the coupling of local employment generation strategies with policies that make geographic mobility easier; 2) harnessing the equalising effects of education by investing in early childhood education and creating more pathways to higher education attainment for the poor; 3) supporting youth in finding desirable and satisfactory career options through increased investment in mentorship and career guidance programmes; 4) redesigning social protection schemes to meet

f The gig economy describes the rise of service employment that is based on 'gigs' or one off service provision. Often digital platforms are used to connect customers with service providers. A well-known example of a job in the gig economy is drivers for ride hailing companies such as Uber or Ola.

the needs of a unique and diverse population; and 5) carving out a role for companies and holding them accountable for improvements in social mobility.

Increasing social mobility is important in advancing equality. It is also vital for economic

efficiency, as it enhances the use of individual abilities, especially for India which is aiming to realise a massive dividend from its young demographic. Equalising opportunity can help unleash the potential of the population, which as it stands is constrained by persistent income and occupational rigidity. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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