



Socio-Economic Status and Social Mobility

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19497998>

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Abstract

This research investigates the connection between socio-economic status (SES) and social mobility in today's educational and social settings. SES, typically assessed through factors like income, education, and occupation, plays a crucial role in determining access to resources, opportunities, and life outcomes. The paper delves into how structural inequalities affect both upward and downward mobility across different generations. Employing a qualitative research approach that utilizes secondary data and thematic analysis, the study compiles existing literature to uncover consistent patterns in educational achievement, occupational mobility, and social stratification. The results emphasize that access to education, policy measures, and family background are key factors influencing mobility paths in societies marked by inequality.

Keywords: Socio-economic status, social mobility, education, inequality

Introduction

Socio-economic status (SES) denotes an individual's or group's relative standing in society, typically assessed through factors like income, education level, and job prestige. It is a crucial determinant of life chances, especially concerning education, employment, health, and social engagement (Adler & Ostrove, 1999; APA, 2024) ^[1, 3]. In contrast, social mobility describes the movement between different social levels, either upward or downward, over a person's lifetime or across generations (Sorokin, 1959) ^[10].

The link between SES and social mobility is a central topic in sociology, economics, and education research. Studies consistently show that those born into families with higher SES often have better access to quality education, social networks, and professional connections, which enhances their prospects for upward mobility. On the other hand, low SES frequently perpetuates structural disadvantages across generations, restricting educational and occupational progress (Broer, 2019; Crawford *et al.*, 2011) ^[6, 8]. This suggests that socio-economic disparities are often maintained through institutional and family structures.

In India, this issue is further complicated by the interplay of class, caste, gender, and regional differences. Educational institutions often serve as both opportunities and mechanisms for perpetuating inequality, with access to

quality educational resources and institutional support varying significantly among social groups (Venumuddala, 2020) ^[11]. Thus, exploring the connection between SES and mobility is crucial for understanding broader issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

This study seeks to explore the conceptual and empirical aspects of SES and social mobility through a qualitative review framework, focusing particularly on educational implications and policy significance.

Literature and Review

Broer (2019) ^[6] examined the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and educational achievement across multiple national contexts and found that SES remains one of the most significant predictors of academic performance. The study, based on longitudinal TIMSS data across 13 education systems, demonstrated that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds consistently performed better than those from lower SES groups. The findings further suggest that inequality in educational outcomes is structurally linked to differences in family resources, parental education, and access to learning opportunities.

Crawford *et al.* (2011) ^[8] focused on intergenerational social mobility and highlighted the role of parental background in shaping children's future life chances. Their review showed that early childhood educational access, parental income,

and family social capital strongly influence educational attainment and later occupational mobility. The study emphasized that disadvantages experienced during early schooling often continue into adulthood, thereby limiting upward mobility across generations.

Antonoplis (2023)^[2] critically addressed the conceptual and methodological issues involved in measuring SES within psychological and social science research. The study argued that conventional SES indicators such as income, education, and occupation may not fully capture the complexity of socio-economic conditions. It further proposed that researchers should adopt more nuanced and multidimensional approaches to understand how SES influences life outcomes and social mobility.

Venumuddala (2020)^[11] explored patterns of social mobility among different social groups in India, particularly across educational and occupational dimensions. The study found that although some improvement in upward educational mobility is visible among marginalized groups such as SCs and STs, occupational mobility remains relatively constrained. This indicates that educational advancement alone may not always translate into equivalent occupational or economic mobility, especially within structurally unequal societies like India.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2024)^[3] emphasized that socio-economic status has a profound impact on academic achievement and long-term life outcomes. According to the report, students from lower SES backgrounds often face limited access to quality educational resources, healthcare, and supportive learning environments, which negatively affect academic progression and future career opportunities. This reinforces the idea that SES plays a crucial role in determining social mobility trajectories.

Theoretical Framework: Weberian Perspective on Social Stratification and Mobility

Max Weber's theoretical perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of the link between socio-economic status (SES) and social mobility. Unlike Karl Marx, who focused on economic ownership and control over production as the foundation of class differences, Weber expanded this idea by introducing a multidimensional view of social stratification. Weber argued that class is not solely determined by property or wealth ownership. Instead, it is also shaped by the market value of an individual's skills, qualifications, and services. For example, the social and economic worth attributed to a doctor's services is markedly different from that of a clerk or manual laborer. Consequently, socio-economic status is influenced not only by property but also by educational qualifications, occupational prestige, and access to valued services. Weber further posited that social stratification is influenced by three interconnected dimensions: class, status, and power (Weber, 1978)^[12].

In this context, class pertains to economic standing, status relates to social prestige or honor, and party involves political power and group-based influence. These dimensions are crucial for studying social mobility, as upward movement in society often depends not only on income but also on educational credentials, occupational status, and access to influential networks. In India, this framework is particularly relevant. Social mobility is

frequently affected by caste, professional status, political affiliation, and inherited social privilege. For instance, professions like doctors, engineers, and professors continue to hold higher social prestige, significantly impacting life opportunities and mobility patterns. Thus, Weber's multidimensional approach offers a more robust theoretical foundation for understanding how socio-economic status affects social mobility beyond mere economic explanations.

Research Gap

While there is a wealth of research on socioeconomic status (SES) and educational inequality, fewer investigations have combined the concepts of social mobility and educational change in developing countries, especially in India. The current body of work often highlights economic factors but tends to overlook aspects such as cultural capital, regional differences, and institutional obstacles. Additionally, there is a scarcity of thematic studies examining how educational systems influence intergenerational mobility. This research aims to fill this void by conducting a thematic analysis of the literature, concentrating on the interplay between SES, education, and social mobility.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does socio-economic status affect social mobility?
2. What is the significance of education in facilitating upward mobility?
3. How do structural inequalities perpetuate social immobility?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how socio-economic status influences social mobility.
2. To investigate how education contributes to upward mobility.
3. To pinpoint structural obstacles that hinder social mobility.

Research Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative review-based research design to explore the link between socio-economic status (SES) and social mobility. A qualitative approach is deemed suitable as the study aims to interpret, synthesize, and critically evaluate existing knowledge rather than produce numerical results through primary data collection. The review-based design facilitates a deeper conceptual understanding of how socio-economic conditions affect educational opportunities, occupational outcomes, and intergenerational mobility across various social contexts. This design is particularly effective for identifying patterns, theoretical perspectives, and recurring themes within the existing literature.

Secondary Data Sources: The study relies entirely on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government reports, policy documents, census-based publications, and reputable academic databases. Sources were chosen based on their relevance to socio-economic inequality, education, and social mobility. Databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Springer, Sage Journals, and government publications were

consulted to ensure the study's credibility and academic rigor. Additionally, reports from educational and policy institutions were reviewed to gain insights into the broader structural dimensions of mobility and inequality.

Thematic Analysis

The study uses thematic analysis as the primary analytical framework for examining the collected secondary data. Thematic analysis aids in identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring ideas and patterns within the literature. After reviewing the selected sources, key themes were developed around SES indicators, educational access, intergenerational mobility, and structural inequality. These themes provide a systematic framework for understanding how socio-economic conditions influence opportunities for upward and downward mobility. The method also allows the study to coherently connect theoretical insights with practical educational and social implications.

Discussion and Analysis

Objective 1: Connection between Socio-Economic Status and Social Mobility

The study indicates that socio-economic status (SES) is crucial in determining the life paths of individuals and families. SES, typically assessed through factors like income, education, occupation, and access to social resources, significantly affects the opportunities available for upward social mobility. Those from higher SES backgrounds often enjoy greater economic resources, stable family settings, access to quality healthcare, and superior educational institutions. These benefits collectively enhance academic success, professional accomplishments, and long-term job security.

One key way SES impacts mobility is through the uneven distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital. Families with higher incomes can more effectively invest in their children's education by providing private schooling, tutoring, digital tools, and enrichment activities. Additionally, cultural capital—such as language skills, educational attitudes, and familiarity with institutional norms—further boosts the chances of upward mobility. This aligns with Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, which suggests that privilege is frequently passed down through generations via institutionalized forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986)^[5].

Conversely, individuals from lower SES backgrounds often face limited access to these resources. Economic instability, inadequate schooling infrastructure, and restricted social networks often result in lower educational achievements and diminished job prospects. As a result, upward mobility is often structurally limited. Broer (2019)^[6] also found that SES is a significant predictor of educational success across various national contexts and remains a strong factor in perpetuating inequality. Moreover, Crawford *et al.* (2011)^[8] showed that parental background and early educational access play a crucial role in shaping intergenerational mobility.

Objective 2: The Impact of Education on Social Mobility

Education stands out as a crucial tool for social mobility, acting as a transformative force that enables individuals to gain the knowledge, skills, qualifications, and social

legitimacy necessary for career advancement and improved socio-economic standing. Achieving higher levels of education is closely linked to better job prospects, higher earning potential, and increased social status.

Theoretically, education is often seen as the link between inherited disadvantages and achieved status. Those who attain higher education levels are more likely to ascend the social ladder by securing professional and managerial roles (Coleman, 1988)^[7]. This is particularly important in societies characterized by inherited inequality, where education can provide a means to overcome traditional class and caste barriers.

Nevertheless, access to quality education remains highly unequal. Elite institutions often remain out of reach for marginalized groups due to financial limitations, language obstacles, regional disparities, and unequal preparatory environments. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2024)^[3] highlighted that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds frequently encounter limited access to quality educational resources, healthcare, and supportive learning environments, which adversely affect their academic progress and future career prospects.

In India, despite the growth of public education and policy efforts, disparities between urban and rural schools, public and private institutions, and digital learning access continue to influence unequal outcomes. These inequalities limit the transformative potential of education for socially and economically marginalized communities.

Furthermore, educational mobility does not always equate to occupational mobility. Venumuddala (2020)^[11] discovered that while some marginalized groups have improved their educational attainment, their occupational advancement remains relatively slower, indicating that education alone cannot overcome structural inequality.

Objective 3: Structural Barriers to Social Mobility

The discussion further reveals that structural barriers continue to significantly contribute to social immobility. Factors such as caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, regional imbalance, class inequality, and inconsistent policy implementation systematically shape access to opportunities and life chances.

In the Indian context, caste remains a major determinant of mobility. Historically marginalized communities often continue to face obstacles in education, employment, and social acceptance. Even when educational qualifications improve, caste-based discrimination in labor markets and institutional spaces often restricts occupational progression and income mobility.

Gender is another significant structural factor. Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds often encounter multiple layers of disadvantage, including limited educational access, early marriage, unpaid care work, and exclusion from the labor market. This intersection of class, caste, and gender creates compounded barriers to upward mobility.

The concept of social reproduction is particularly relevant here. It suggests that inequalities are not accidental but are systematically passed from one generation to the next through institutions such as family, education, and labor markets (Bourdieu, 1986; Goldthorpe, 1987)^[5, 9]. Thus, social mobility cannot be understood solely through individual merit or effort; rather, it is deeply rooted in institutional, historical, and socio-political structures.

Therefore, the analysis concludes that while education can serve as a powerful tool for upward mobility, its effectiveness is significantly influenced by socio-economic background and structural inequalities.

Findings: The research indicates that socio-economic status continues to be a significant factor in determining social mobility. While educational achievement serves as an important intermediary, its potential for change is hindered by unequal access to educational resources. Structural elements such as caste, class, gender, and regional inequalities still play a role in shaping mobility outcomes. Groups with better access to economic and cultural capital are more likely to experience upward mobility.

Educational Implications

The results of this study highlight the urgent need for educational policies that prioritize inclusivity and equity, aiming to bridge gaps in access, quality, and learning outcomes among various socio-economic groups. Given that socio-economic status plays a crucial role in educational success and subsequent social mobility, educational institutions must be pivotal in addressing structural inequalities. Policies should prioritize providing equal access to high-quality education for students from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds, particularly those facing challenges related to class, caste, gender, and regional disparities.

There should be a strong focus on scholarship programs, fee reductions, and financial assistance to help students from low-income families continue their education without financial barriers. In today's world, digital inclusion is also essential; thus, expanding access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and technology-based learning resources is vital, especially in rural and underserved regions.

Moreover, community support initiatives, mentoring programs, and parental awareness campaigns can enhance the educational environment for first-generation learners. Educational institutions should implement fair practices, such as inclusive teaching methods, language-sensitive instruction, counseling services, and anti-discrimination measures, to foster a supportive learning atmosphere. These efforts can significantly improve educational outcomes and promote upward social mobility for marginalized groups.

Limitations and Delimitations

The research is constrained by its dependence on secondary sources and thematic analysis, lacking any primary field data. Its focus is restricted to the educational and socio-economic aspects of mobility.

Significance of the study

This research enhances scholarly discussions by connecting socioeconomic status with social mobility through the perspective of education. It provides insights relevant to policy-making for tackling inequality.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen inclusive education policies.
2. Increase scholarships for low SES students.
3. Improve rural educational infrastructure.
4. Conduct empirical studies using primary data.

Conclusion

The research concludes that socio-economic status (SES) continues to have a significant and enduring impact on social mobility patterns. The results clearly show that individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically have better access to educational resources, social networks, and economic opportunities, which greatly improve their chances of moving upward. Conversely, those from lower SES groups often encounter numerous structural obstacles that hinder their progress across social levels. Education has been identified as one of the most crucial routes for upward social mobility, equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and qualifications needed for better job prospects, higher income, and increased social recognition. However, the study also highlights that education alone cannot serve as an equalizing force when access to quality education remains unequal. Disparities related to class, caste, gender, and region continue to affect educational achievement and occupational outcomes, especially in the Indian context. Moreover, structural inequalities ingrained in social institutions often perpetuate disadvantage across generations, thus limiting the transformative potential of education. Therefore, effective policy interventions should focus not only on broadening educational access but also on addressing systemic barriers such as social discrimination, regional disparities, and economic inequality. A more inclusive and equitable policy framework is crucial for fostering sustainable social mobility and achieving social justice.

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