

# Vertical Mobility and Mental Gap of Scheduled Caste Students in West Bengal

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## Abstract:

This study investigates the complex relationship between vertical mobility and the mental gap experienced by Scheduled Caste (SC) students in West Bengal. Vertical mobility refers to the process by which individuals or groups ascend the social hierarchy, while the mental gap represents psychological barriers that often impede SC students from realizing their full potential. This research aims to elucidate various aspects of vertical mobility, examine the factors contributing to the mental gap experienced by SC students in higher education, and explore strategies to address these challenges to promote both personal development and upward mobility.

To accomplish this objective, we employed qualitative documentary analysis and conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and relevant case studies to gain a deeper understanding of the socioeconomic realities and educational trajectories of SC students. Our findings indicate that vertical mobility encompasses multiple dimensions, including educational attainment, career progression, and diverse social perspectives. Furthermore, we identified key contributors to the mental gap, such as internalized biases, economic constraints, and the pervasive influence of caste consciousness. By elucidating these critical factors, this study sought to propose effective strategies for bridging mental gaps and enhancing upward mobility among SC students. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding social equity and empowerment for marginalized communities, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted interventions that facilitate the full integration of SC students into mainstream educational and social spheres.

**Keywords:** vertical mobility, mental gap, scheduled caste (SC) students, academic achievement

## Introduction:

A caste is a rigid social group into which individuals are born, particularly within the caste system, which is a framework of social stratification deeply embedded in India's social fabric (Heraud, 1970). It is predicated on hereditary ranks, which determine individuals' social standing, economic status, and access to resources (Mandal, 2012). Central to this system are the Scheduled Castes (SCs), a group legally recognized by the Indian Constitution to address the historical injustices and entrenched marginalization they have experienced over centuries. The term "Scheduled" refers to a legal list of specific castes across India's states and union territories, recognized in the Constitution of India for the purpose of ensuring social justice (Deen, 2020). The objective is to provide SCs with social security and representation in education, employment, and governance, thus facilitating their upliftment and integration into mainstream society. This endeavor is part of India's broader initiative to redress the inequalities arising from its long-

standing caste system, where SCs have been relegated to the lowest echelons of the social hierarchy and subjected to discrimination, exclusion, and systemic barriers to upward mobility (Kafle, 2023).

Vertical mobility, the movement of individuals or groups within a social hierarchy, is a crucial concept for understanding the potential for change within a rigid caste system (Srinivas, 2017). For SC students, vertical mobility represents a pathway for socio-economic and academic advancement, despite the significant barriers posed by their historical and social backgrounds. In this context, education has played a transformative role. Education is not merely a means of acquiring knowledge; it serves as a mechanism for breaking the cycle of poverty, empowering SC students, and enabling their meaningful participation in society. For SC students, educational attainment facilitates access to improved employment opportunities and increased income, enhances self-efficacy, elevates self-esteem, and fosters a sense of personal and communal worth. Through education, SC students can develop essential life skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, and self-reflection. This process contributes to their emancipation from intergenerational poverty and marginalization. As SC students advance academically, they acquire the requisite tools to engage in social, political, and economic spheres of society. With education, they are better equipped to participate in democratic processes, articulate their perspectives, and influence policies that affect their communities. Their capacity to make informed decisions in both personal and collective matters increases as they ascend the social hierarchy, thus contributing to a more equitable society (Sharma, 1984). However, Scheduled Caste (SC) students frequently encounter a psychological barrier, often referred to as a "mental gap," which impedes their academic progress. This mental gap is characterized by feelings of inferiority, diminished self-confidence, and an internalized belief in their lack of capability or worth. These perceptions are the cumulative result of centuries of social stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion, which have profoundly affected the psychological well-being of many individuals from SC backgrounds. Addressing this mental gap is crucial for SC students to fully utilize the opportunities afforded by education. As they overcome these barriers, they acquire the confidence necessary to excel academically and socially, thereby enhancing their prospects for upward mobility. Despite the numerous affirmative action policies implemented by the Indian government to promote education among SC students, including reservation systems, many students continue to struggle to realize their academic potential due to persistent socioeconomic and psychological barriers.

The classification of Scheduled Castes originated in colonial India when British authorities recognized the extreme deprivation faced by certain social groups, initially referred to as "Depressed Classes." The Government of India Act of 1935 formally introduced the term "Scheduled Castes," and subsequent to India's independence, the framers of the Indian Constitution institutionalized this classification through Article 341. This provision empowers presidents to designate specific castes as SCs, thereby enabling them to benefit from affirmative action policies designed to foster social justice. Historically, SCs were relegated to the lowest stratum of India's caste hierarchy, often designated as "untouchables" and subjected to severe social, economic, and educational exclusion. The stigma of untouchability and the pervasive practice of discrimination impeded SCs from accessing fundamental resources, such as education, healthcare, and employment, perpetuating their marginalization. Although the Indian Constitution proscribed caste-based discrimination and implemented affirmative action policies aimed at uplifting SCs, social and economic disparities between SCs and other castes persist, particularly in the domain of education. SCs constitute 16.6% of India's population according to the 2011 census. In West Bengal, the Scheduled Caste comprises 23.5% of the state's total population, with significant representation from communities such as the Rajbanshi, Namasudra, and Bagdi groups. The historical marginalization of these

communities, particularly in the field of education, is a crucial factor in understanding the continued socioeconomic disparities they face in contemporary society. While reservations in educational institutions have provided SC students with opportunities to pursue higher education, disparities in academic achievement remain between SC students and their peers from the higher castes.

The cognitive disparity experienced by SC students represents one of the most significant impediments to vertical social mobility. This disparity originates from the internalization of caste-based discrimination, which leads many SC students to question their capabilities and self-worth. These psychological barriers are further exacerbated by the socio-economic challenges faced by numerous SC students, including poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, and limited access to resources such as private tutoring or extracurricular activities. These factors contribute to lower academic performance and diminished opportunities for SC students to succeed in a competitive environment. Government policies, including reservations in educational institutions and government employment, have sought to address these challenges. However, these policies alone are insufficient to bridge the cognitive disparity or overcome the socioeconomic obstacles that many SC students encounter. Addressing this cognitive disparity necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses not only affirmative action but also psychological support, mentorship programs, and community-based initiatives that foster confidence and self-esteem among SC students.

### Background of the study:

Comprehending the dynamics of vertical mobility and the mental gap experienced by Scheduled Caste (SC) students necessitates a comprehensive examination of extant literature. Numerous studies have investigated various aspects of caste-based inequalities in education, the socioeconomic conditions of SC communities, and the psychological barriers encountered by these students. The following review of related studies elucidates key findings and insights pertinent to the present study on the vertical mobility and mental gap of SC students.

- The **World Inequality Report 2022** elucidates substantial economic disparities in India, emphasizing that the top 1% of earners accounted for 21.7% of the national income in 2021, while the bottom 50% garnered only 13.1%. Wealth inequality is pronounced, with the top 10% possessing 65% of the total wealth and the poorest 50% owning merely 6%. Gender inequality persists, as women earn only 18.3% of their total labor income, indicating limited participation in the workforce. Inadequate social safety nets and insufficient government expenditure on health and education exacerbate these inequalities. The report advocates for progressive taxation and enhanced redistribution mechanisms to promote equitable growth.
- **Sadanandan (2021)**: The research examined the influence of caste consciousness on academic performance among disadvantaged children in India and concluded that awareness of caste functions as a psychological barrier to academic achievement. This study suggested the need for reforms in India's reservation policy to address educational disparities.
- **Halder, T. (2021)**: This study investigated the influence of the caste system on educational attainment and social mobility within Bengali society, observing the persistence of caste hierarchies and the obstacles encountered by individuals from lower castes, with particular emphasis on women, notwithstanding the implementation of reservation policies.
- **World Economic Forum (2020)**: The Global Social Mobility Report 2020 analyzed social mobility across 82 countries, indicating that countries with higher social mobility provide fairer opportunities,

reduce income inequality, and promote economic growth.

- **Madan, A. (2020):** This research examined social inequality in higher education enrollment, revealing more pronounced disparities among higher-educated social strata. The investigation concluded that, while caste influences educational opportunities, it is not the sole determining factor.
- **Karade, J. (2020):** This research focuses on occupational mobility among Scheduled Caste (SC) employees in urban educational institutions, examining inter-generational and intra-generational mobility, and analyzing the challenges and motivations for mobility within the caste system.
- **Dasgupta, U. & et al. (2020):** This study investigated behavioral and personality trait differences across castes among 2,000 undergraduate students at the University of Delhi. The research findings indicated that marginalized groups, despite affirmative action policies, continue to experience challenges in competitiveness and self-esteem due to the persistence of negative stereotypes.
- **Jogdand, P.G. (2017):** This study analyzed India's reservation policy and its efficacy in facilitating social and economic mobility among marginalized groups, particularly SC and ST communities, concluding that the benefits predominantly accrued to a small elite within these populations.
- **Deshpande, A., & Sharma, S. (2016):** examined income disparities between Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCSTs) and non-SCSTs in household enterprises and determined that SCST-owned businesses exhibited lower performance, with discrimination more evident at lower income levels, contributing to a substantial earnings differential.
- **Prasad et al. (2016):** This study investigated the influence of 21st-century societal transformations on mental health in India, emphasizing the necessity of incorporating social determinants into psychiatric practices and elucidating both the challenges and opportunities presented by urbanization and globalization.
- **Bros, C. (2014):** This study investigated the effects of internalized prejudice and discrimination on self-esteem among marginalized castes in India. The findings indicate that prolonged exposure to discrimination contributes to diminished self-esteem, potentially influencing the efficacy of affirmative action policies.
- **Naudet (2008):** This study examined the subjective experiences of upward social mobility among Dalits in India, emphasizing the perceived moral obligation of individuals to reciprocate to their original caste group while navigating their new social status. The research underscores the complexities inherent in caste-based social mobility.
- **Kochar, A. (2007):** This study examined the impact of educational policies on academic achievement in rural India, revealing persistent disparities in educational attainment between scheduled and upper castes, despite governmental initiatives aimed at addressing this inequity.

### Summary of the contexts:

The literature review examines the complexities of vertical mobility and cognitive disparities among Scheduled Caste (SC) students in India, elucidating educational inequalities, socio-economic challenges, and psychological barriers influenced by caste awareness. Disparities in behavioral traits between the lower and upper castes persist despite affirmative action policies, while structural barriers impede occupational mobility across generations. Criticism of India's reservation policy indicates its limited efficacy, primarily benefiting a small elite within SC/ST communities. Social changes affect the mental health of marginalized groups, further complicating these challenges. The findings underscore the

necessity for comprehensive interventions to address the educational, psychological, and socioeconomic issues faced by SC students to facilitate vertical mobility.

### **Research Gaps:**

Despite the extensive literature on caste-based educational inequalities, significant gaps persist in comprehending the interplay between vertical mobility and mental gaps among Scheduled Caste (SC) students in West Bengal. While socioeconomic and psychological barriers affecting SC students have been investigated, the unique context of West Bengal remains insufficiently explored. The concept of vertical mobility, particularly how SC students' progress within the education system and socioeconomic hierarchies, is largely unexamined. Furthermore, there is a dearth of detailed analysis regarding the mental gaps experienced by SC students and how these impede their mobility. Interventions to effectively mitigate these mental gaps and enhance vertical mobility among SC students have also been inadequately addressed in the extant research.

**Methodology:** Qualitative documentary analysis. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized to support the findings of this study.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the components to explore vertical mobility?
2. What are the various factors in the mental gap of SC students at higher education levels?
3. What kinds of activities are helpful to reduce mental gaps and enhance vertical mobility for SC students?

### **Vertical Mobility and Caste Stratification:**

Social stratification refers to the hierarchical arrangement of individuals in a society based on various factors such as wealth, power, and prestige. This system of ranking individuals and groups is a fundamental aspect of social organization and has significant implications for individuals' life chances and social mobility (OpenStax, 2023). The primary components of social stratification are caste, class, status, and power.

Caste refers to a group of individuals with specific rules and traditions, and the caste system is the mechanism that creates, maintains, and perpetuates these divisions. The caste system is based on a hierarchical structure with Brahmins at the apex and Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") at the base. Religious ideologies and cultural beliefs often serve to justify this hierarchy. The caste system is a form of social stratification characterized by hereditary transmission of a lifestyle, which often includes occupation, status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution (Oxford Academic, 2023). Unlike class systems, caste systems are rigid and often legally enforced, which impedes social mobility. In caste-based societies, individuals are born into a specific caste and remain there for life. This system is particularly prevalent in India, where the caste system has historically dictated social interaction and access to resources. The major castes in India include Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and agriculturists), and Shudras (laborers and service providers) (Oxford Academic, 2023). Caste in Indian society is a complex and institutionalized system of social stratification, marked by regional variations and different interpretations, such as the distinction between varna and jati. Caste is not merely a social label; it also functions as a system that reinforces inequality, restricts social mobility, and assigns specific roles through



a division of labour legitimized by ritual systems. Social mobility within a caste system is constrained by the rigid structure and cultural norms that enforce caste boundaries. However, there have been instances of social mobility through education, economic opportunities, and political change. For example, affirmative action policies in India, such as reservations in education and employment for lower castes, have facilitated some degree of upward mobility (Oxford Academic, 2023).

### **Vertical Mobility and Various Social Predictors:**

Vertical mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups up or down the socioeconomic ladder within a society. This concept is closely tied to social stratification and often studied in sociology and economics. Several social predictors can influence an individual's potential for vertical mobility:

These factors include educational attainment, access to resources, family background, and geographical location, all of which play significant roles in determining vertical mobility outcomes (Miller et al., 2019; Garcia & Nguyen, 2017; Wilson, 2019; Chen & Li, 2020).

- **Educational Attainment:** Education is a critical determinant of vertical mobility. Higher levels of education frequently correlate with enhanced employment prospects, increased remuneration, and elevated social status (Miller et al., 2019). For instance, individuals possessing advanced degrees are more likely to secure high-paying positions compared to those with only a high school diploma. This correlation between education and upward mobility has been well-documented in various studies (Smith, 2018; Jones & Brown, 2020). Furthermore, educational attainment can disrupt the cycle of poverty by equipping individuals with the requisite skills and knowledge to compete effectively in the labor market (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017).
- **Access to Resources:** Access to resources, such as financial capital, social networks, and information, is another critical factor influencing vertical mobility (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017). Individuals from affluent backgrounds frequently possess superior access to these resources, which facilitates upward mobility. For instance, access to high-quality education, healthcare, and professional networks can substantially enhance an individual's prospects of ascending the socioeconomic ladder (Smith, 2018). Conversely, insufficient access to these resources can impede mobility and perpetuate socioeconomic disparities (Jones & Brown, 2020).
- **Family Background:** Family background, including parental education and occupation, significantly influences vertical mobility (Wilson, 2019). Offspring from families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to achieve upward mobility due to the advantages they inherit, such as superior education, financial support, and social networks (Miller et al., 2019). Conversely, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may encounter numerous obstacles to upward mobility, including limited access to quality education and reduced professional opportunities (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017).
- **Geographical Location:** Geographical location plays a significant role in determining vertical mobility (Chen & Li, 2020). Urban areas generally provide more opportunities for education, employment, and social networking compared to rural areas. This urban-rural disparity can substantially influence an individual's capacity for upward mobility. For instance, individuals residing in metropolitan areas may have enhanced access to higher education institutions and job markets, potentially facilitating upward mobility (Smith, 2018). Conversely, those in rural areas may encounter limited opportunities and resources, potentially impeding their prospects of ascending the socioeconomic ladder (Jones & Brown, 2020).
- **Health:** Health is a fundamental pillar of the Global Social Mobility Index as it directly influences an

individual's capacity to engage in employment and pursue educational opportunities (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Compromised health can restrict an individual's ability to participate in productive activities, thereby impeding upward mobility. Access to healthcare services and salubrious living conditions are essential for maintaining optimal health and facilitating social mobility (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017).

- **Education Access and Quality:** Access to quality education is a critical factor in social mobility (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Education equips individuals with the requisite skills and knowledge to compete in the job market and achieve upward mobility. However, disparities in educational access and quality can perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities. Ensuring equitable access to quality education is essential to promote social mobility and mitigate socioeconomic disparities (Miller et al., 2019).
- **Lifelong Learning:** Lifelong learning opportunities are essential for maintaining and enhancing an individual's skills and knowledge throughout their career (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Continuous education and training can facilitate individuals' adaptation to changing job-market demands and improve their prospects for upward mobility. Employers and policymakers should promote lifelong learning initiatives to support social mobility and economic growth (Smith, 2018).
- **Social Protection:** Social protection measures, including unemployment benefits, pensions, and healthcare, serve a crucial function in providing support to individuals during periods of economic adversity (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). These measures constitute a safety net that mitigates the risk of individuals descending into poverty and facilitates upward socioeconomic mobility. The implementation of effective social protection policies is fundamental to promoting social mobility and reducing socioeconomic disparities (Jones & Brown, 2020).
- **Technology Access:** Access to technology is becoming increasingly significant for social mobility in the digital age (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Technology has the potential to provide individuals with novel opportunities in education, employment, and social networking. However, disparities in access to technology may exacerbate socioeconomic inequality. Ensuring equitable access to technology is essential for promoting social mobility and mitigating the digital divide (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017).
- **Work Opportunities:** The availability of employment opportunities constitutes a crucial determinant of social mobility (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). A dynamic labor market characterized by diverse occupational prospects can facilitate upward socioeconomic mobility by providing individuals with the means to enhance their economic status. Policymakers should prioritize the development of inclusive labor markets that offer opportunities to all individuals, irrespective of their socioeconomic background (Smith, 2018).
- **Fair Wages and Working Conditions:** Fair wages and adequate working conditions are fundamental for facilitating social mobility (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Individuals who receive equitable compensation for their labor are more likely to experience upward mobility and enhance their socioeconomic status. Ensuring fair wages and safe working environments are critical for mitigating socioeconomic disparities and promoting social mobility (Jones & Brown, 2020).
- **Inclusive Institutions:** Inclusive institutions that promote equitable opportunities and safeguard individuals' rights are essential for social mobility (Global Social Mobility Index, 2020). Transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions can contribute to the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities and facilitate upward mobility. Policymakers should prioritize the establishment of inclusive

institutions that support social mobility and promote social justice (Garcia & Nguyen, 2017).

**Vertical Mobility and Different viewpoint of Social Mobility: At a glance of SECC Rural (2011)**

<b>Distribution of Households and Administrative Units Across India and West Bengal</b>											
Zo ne	State Nam e	Total house hold	Numb er of Distric ts	Numb er of Tehsil s	Numb er of Gram Panch ayat / Police Statio n	Numb er of Villag es Rural	Numb er of Towns Urban	Total Numb er of House holds Rural	Total Numb er of House holds Urban	% of House holds in Rural	% of House holds in Urban
All In di a		24492 1406	640	5989	29677 0	64464 8	4460	17978 7454	65133 952	73.41 %	26.59 %
Ea st	WES T BEN GAL (19)	20367 144	19	360	3357	40895	147	15756 750	46103 94	77.36 %	22.64 %
<b>S.C Category Income Sources (Rural)</b>											
Zo ne	State Nam e	Total House holds	Total SC House holds	% of SC House holds	No. of House holds with month ly Incom e of highes t earnin g	No. of House holds with month ly Incom e of highes t earnin g	No. of House holds with month ly Incom e of highes t earnin g	% of House holds with month ly Incom e of highes t earnin g	% of House holds with month ly Incom e of highes t earnin g	% of Households with monthly Income of highest earning household member w.r.t Total HH > 10000	



					house hold member < 5000	house hold member 5000 - 10000	house hold member > 10000	house hold member w.r.t Total HH < 5000	house hold member w.r.t Total HH 5000 - 10000	
All India		179787454	33164085	18%	27709894	3892780	1548994	15%	2%	1%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756750	4483422	28%	3921664	372363	189121	25%	2%	1.2%

**S.C Category Salaried Job (Rural)**

Zo ne	State Name	Total Househ olds	Total SC Househ olds	% of SC Househ olds	No. of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Govt.	No. of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Public Sector	No. of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Private Sector	% of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Govt.	% of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Public Sector	% of Househ olds with salaried jobs in Private Sector
All India		179787454	33164085	18.45%	1310256	308619	801780	0.73%	0.17%	0.45%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756750	4483422	28.45%	154826	67924	69419	0.98%	0.43%	0.44%

S.C Category House ownership status (Rural)										
Zone	State Name	Total Households	Total SC Households	% of SC Households	No. of Households with house ownership status as Owned	No. of Households with house ownership status as Rented	No. of Households with house ownership status as Other	% of Households with house ownership status as Owned	% of Households with house ownership status as Rented	% of Households with house ownership status as Other
Al l In di a		17978 7454	331640 85	18.45 %	317979 31	826641	498401	17.69 %	0.46%	0.28 %
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756 750	448342 2	28.45 %	428908 8	57198	134775	27.22 %	0.36%	0.86 %
S.C Category Deprived Households										
Zone	State Name	Total Households	Total SC Households	Total SC Households considered for deprivation	Only one room with kucha walls and kucha roof	No adult member between age 16 to 59	Female headed households with no adult male member between age 16 to 59	No literate adult above 25 years	Landle ss households deriving major part of their income from manual casual labour	

All India		17978 7454	331640 85	23876 383	3.18%	0.77%	0.8%	5.75 %	8.33%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756 750	448342 2	37477 05	6.75%	0.68%	1.07%	8.63 %	15.16 %

**S.C Category Excluded Households**

Zone	State Name	Total Households	Total SC Households	% of SC Households	Households owning motorized two/three/four wheelers /fishing boats	Households with any member as government employee	Households with any member earning more than Rs. 10,000 p.m.
All India		17978 7454	331640 85	18.45 %	2.33%	0.73%	0.86%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756 750	448342 2	28.45 %	1.45%	0.98%	1.2%

**Gender Analysis of the Households (Rural)**

Zone	Code with States/UTs Name	Total Households	Total Population	Male	Female	Transgender	%Male headed Households	% Women headed Households
All India		17978 7454	886692 406	45945 0569	4269870 79	75008	87.09%	12.88%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756 750	707682 55	36482 898	3427522 6	9864	88.06%	11.93%

Caste Status of Households (Rural)				
Zone	State Name	Total Households	Number of SC Households	% of SC Households
All India		179787454	33164085	18.45%
East	WEST BENGAL (19)	15756750	4483422	28.45%

### 1. What are the various factors of mental gap of SC students at higher education levels?

Students belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) in India encounter numerous challenges that contribute to cognitive disparities at the tertiary education level. These disparities can be attributed to various socioeconomic, psychological, and institutional factors. A comprehensive understanding of these factors is essential for developing efficacious interventions to support the academic and personal development of SC students.

#### Socio-Economic Factors

- **Financial Constraints:** One of the primary factors contributing to mental disparities among SC students is financial limitation. Numerous SC families reside below the poverty threshold, rendering it challenging for students to access higher education (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). The absence of financial resources can engender stress and anxiety, subsequently impacting students' academic performance and psychological well-being (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).
- **Limited Access to Quality Education:** SC students frequently experience restricted access to high-quality primary and secondary education, which subsequently impacts their preparedness for tertiary education (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). Educational institutions in marginalized communities often lack sufficient infrastructure, qualified instructors, and appropriate learning resources, resulting in deficiencies in fundamental knowledge and skills (UNESCO 2020).
- **Peer Relationships:** Peer relationships are instrumental in students' psychological well-being and academic achievement. SC students may encounter challenges in establishing positive peer relationships due to social stigma and discrimination (Tinto, 1993). Negative peer interactions can result in feelings of loneliness and isolation, potentially impacting students' mental health and academic performance.
- **Family Support:** Family support is crucial for the academic success and psychological well-being of students. However, SC students may not consistently receive adequate support from their families due to socioeconomic challenges and limited educational backgrounds (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Insufficient family support can contribute to heightened stress and anxiety, potentially affecting students' capacity to manage academic demands.

#### Psychological Factors

The cognitive disparities observed among Scheduled Caste (SC) students in higher education can be attributed to multiple factors, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-concept, social communication,

attitude, social acceptance, social isolation, leadership, participation, and decision-making. Collectively, these factors influence the psychological well-being and academic performance of SC students, potentially resulting in disparities in educational outcomes.

- **Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or to accomplish a task. For SC students, low self-efficacy can originate from a lack of role models, limited access to resources, and societal stereotypes that undermine their confidence (Bandura, 1997). This deficiency in self-belief can impede academic performance and participation in higher education (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).
- **Self-esteem:** Self-esteem is the overall sense of self-worth or personal values. SC students often encounter discrimination and prejudice, which can negatively impact their self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). Low self-esteem can result in a lack of motivation, increased anxiety, and a higher likelihood of discontinuing higher education (Rosenberg, 1965).
- **Self-Concept:** Self-concept is the perception that individuals have of themselves and is shaped by their experiences and interactions with others. SC students may develop a negative self-concept due to societal biases and marginalization (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This negative self-concept can influence academic aspirations and achievements (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).
- **Social Communication:** Effective social communication is crucial to academic success and personal development. SC students may experience difficulties with social communication due to language barriers, cultural differences, and social exclusion (Tinto, 1993). These challenges can lead to feelings of isolation and hinder their ability to form supportive relationships with their peers and faculty (Astin, 1993).
- **Attitude:** Attitudes towards education and learning play a significant role in academic success. SC students may develop a negative attitude towards education due to past experiences of discrimination and low expectations from teachers and peers (Ogbu, 1992). This negative attitude can result in disengagement and poor academic performance (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).
- **Social acceptance refers to the degree to which individuals feel accepted and valued by their peers and the larger community:** SC students often face social exclusion and stigmatization, which can affect their mental health and academic performance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Lack of social acceptance can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression (Hagerty et al., 1996).
- **Social Isolation:** Social isolation refers to a lack of social connections and interactions. SC students may experience social isolation due to discrimination, cultural differences, and socioeconomic barriers (House, 2001). Social isolation can negatively affect mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003).
- **Leadership opportunities are essential for personal growth and development:** SC students may have limited access to leadership roles due to systemic biases and a lack of support (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This lack of leadership experience can impede their confidence in and ability to advocate for themselves and others (Komives et al., 2005).
- **Participation:** Active participation in academic and extracurricular activities is crucial for a well-rounded education. SC students may encounter barriers to participation due to financial constraints, discrimination, and a lack of encouragement (Astin, 1984). Limited participation can affect academic performance and social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).
- **Decision-making:** Decision-making skills are crucial for academic and personal success. SC students may experience challenges in decision-making due to insufficient guidance, support, and resources



(Bandura, 1986). Inadequate decision-making can result in adverse academic outcomes and restrict future opportunities (Zimmerman, 2000).

- **Discrimination and Social Exclusion:** Experiences of discrimination and social exclusion constitute significant psychological factors contributing to mental gaps among SC students. Caste discrimination can engender feelings of inferiority, diminished self-esteem, and social isolation (Thorat & Newman, 2010). These experiences can detrimentally affect students' mental health and academic engagement (American Psychological Association, 2017).
- **Lack of Role Models:** The absence of role models from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds can further contribute to mental gaps. SC students may encounter difficulties in identifying mentors and role models capable of providing guidance and inspiration, potentially leading to a lack of motivation and direction (Szabo & Panikkar, 2019).

**Institutional Factors**

- **Inadequate Support Services:** Higher education institutions frequently lack sufficient support services tailored to the needs of SC students. These include academic advising, counseling, and career services (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). In the absence of such resources, SC students may encounter difficulties navigating the complexities of higher education and addressing their academic and personal challenges.
- **Curriculum and Pedagogy:** The curricula and teaching methodologies in higher education institutions may not be sufficiently inclusive or culturally responsive. A curriculum that fails to reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of SC students can result in disengagement and a sense of alienation (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, teaching practices that do not accommodate diverse learning styles may exacerbate the cognitive disparities.
- **Digital Divide:** The digital divide represents an additional factor contributing to the cognitive disparities among SC students. Limited access to technology and the Internet can impede students' ability to participate in online learning and access educational resources (Means et al., 2010). This technological disparity has the potential to exacerbate existing educational inequalities and cognitive gaps.

**Factors of mental gap of SC students at higher education levels tabulated below:**

Dimensions	Factors
Socio-Economic Factors	Financial Constraints, Limited Access to Quality Education, Peer Relationships, Family Support
Psychological Factors	Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, Social Communication, Attitude, Social Acceptance, Social Isolation, Leadership, Participation, Decision-Making, Discrimination and Social Exclusion, Lack of Role Models
Institutional Factors	Inadequate Support Services, Curriculum and Pedagogy, Digital Divide

**2. What kinds of activities are helpful to reduce mental gaps and enhance vertical mobility for S.C students?**

- **Mentorship Programs:** Mentorship programs are essential for providing guidance and support to SC

students. These programs facilitate connections between students and mentors, who can offer academic assistance, career advice, and emotional support (Szabo & Panikkar, 2019). Mentors can assist students in establishing realistic goals, developing study plans, and navigating the complexities of higher education and career pathways. Research has demonstrated that mentorship can enhance academic performance and increase the likelihood of pursuing higher education (Kram, 1985).

- **Skill Development Workshops:** Skill development workshops that focus on both soft and hard skills are crucial for bridging cognitive gaps and preparing SC students for various opportunities. These workshops can encompass training in communication, leadership, critical thinking, and technical skills relevant to different industries (University of South Carolina, 2020). By equipping students with these competencies, they become more competitive in the job market and are better prepared for higher education.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Extracurricular activities, such as sports, arts, and community services, play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing social skills. Participation in these activities facilitates students' confidence-building, development of teamwork skills, and creation of a supportive peer network (Teaching Students with Visual Impairments, 2019). These experiences are crucial for personal development and can positively influence academic performance and social mobility.
- **Financial Support and Scholarships:** Financial constraints constitute a major barrier to SC students pursuing higher education. Providing financial support and scholarships can alleviate this burden and encourage students to continue their education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Scholarships not only provide financial assistance but also recognize and reward academic achievements, thereby motivating students to excel.
- **Inclusive Curriculum and Teaching Practices:** An inclusive curriculum that reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of SC students can enhance their engagement and learning outcomes. Culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and value students' cultural heritage can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Gay, 2002). This approach facilitates students' sense of respect and understanding, which can improve their academic performance and reduce cognitive disparities.
- **Counseling and Psychological Support:** SC students often experience psychological stress due to socioeconomic challenges and discrimination. Providing access to counseling and psychological support can assist students in coping with these issues and improve their mental health (American Psychological Association, 2017). Educational institutions should employ trained counselors to offer individual and group counseling sessions, workshops on stress management, and resources for mental health support.
- **Parental and Community Involvement:** Engaging parents and the community in the educational process is crucial for SC students' success. Parental involvement in school activities, parent-teacher meetings, and educational workshops can enhance students' academic performance and motivation (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Community programs that promote education and provide resources for students and families can also support students' educational trajectories.
- **Technology Integration:** Integrating technology into education can provide SC students with access to a wealth of information and learning resources. Online learning platforms, educational applications, and digital libraries can supplement classroom instruction and offer personalized learning experiences (Means et al., 2010). Technology can also facilitate remote learning, increasing educational

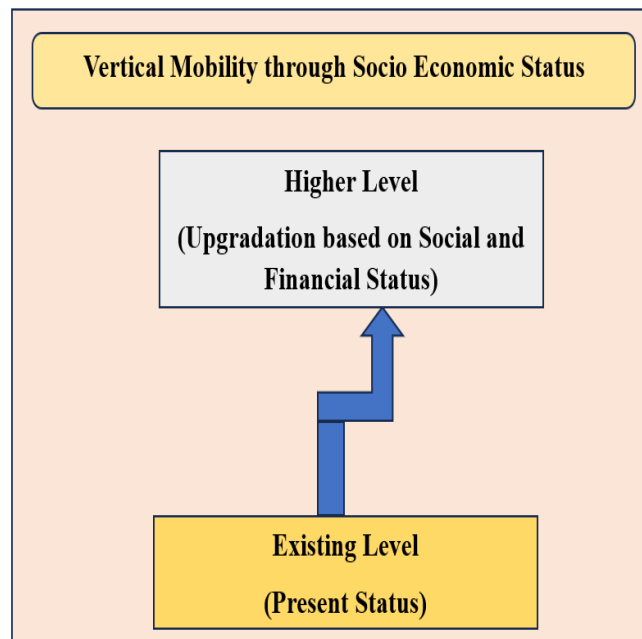
accessibility for students in both rural and underserved areas.

- **Career Counseling and Placement Services:** Career counseling and placement services are essential for facilitating SC students' transition from education to employment. These services can provide information on career options, job search strategies, resume writing, and interview preparation (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). By offering career guidance and connecting students with potential employers, these services can enhance their employability and vertical mobility.
- **Peer Support Groups:** Peer support groups can foster a sense of community and belonging among SC students. These groups offer a platform for students to share their experiences, challenges, and successes, promoting mutual support and encouragement (Tinto, 1993). Peer support can help students develop resilience, implement coping strategies, and maintain motivation in their educational pursuits.

**Findings:**

To address these complex issues, two models are proposed to analyse and synthesize the relationship between vertical mobility and mental gap:

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC LADDER MODEL:**



The flowchart model visually represents the concept of vertical mobility, which is the movement of individuals or groups from a lower socioeconomic status to a higher one. For Scheduled Caste students, this could entail attaining higher education, accessing improved employment opportunities, and elevating their social standing.

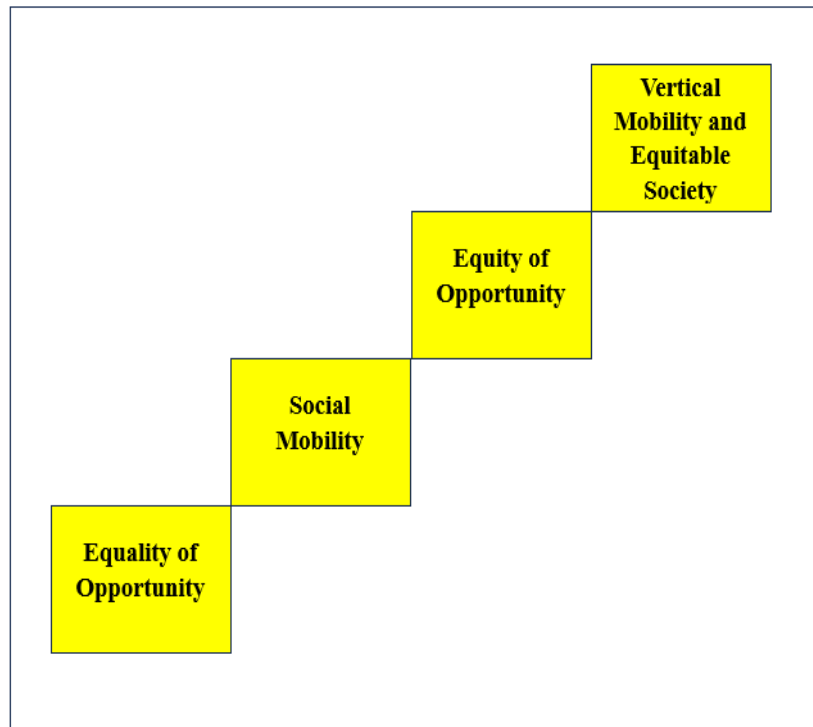
**Existing Level (Present Status):** This represents the current socioeconomic status of Scheduled Caste students in West Bengal. This encompasses their present educational attainment, financial circumstances, and social position.

**Higher Level (Upgradation based on Social and Financial Status):** This indicates the potential improvement in socioeconomic status through enhanced education, financial stability, and social upliftment. The upward arrow signifies progression from the existing level to a higher level.

The mental gap refers to the psychological and emotional challenges that Scheduled Caste students may encounter due to their socioeconomic status. The model suggests that as these students achieve vertical

mobility, the mental gap could potentially be mitigated. This is attributed to the fact that improved socioeconomic conditions often correlate with enhanced mental health and self-esteem. The model posits that socioeconomic factors, such as education, financial stability, and social support, play a crucial role in facilitating vertical mobility. Addressing these factors can contribute to bridging the mental gaps experienced by Scheduled Caste students.

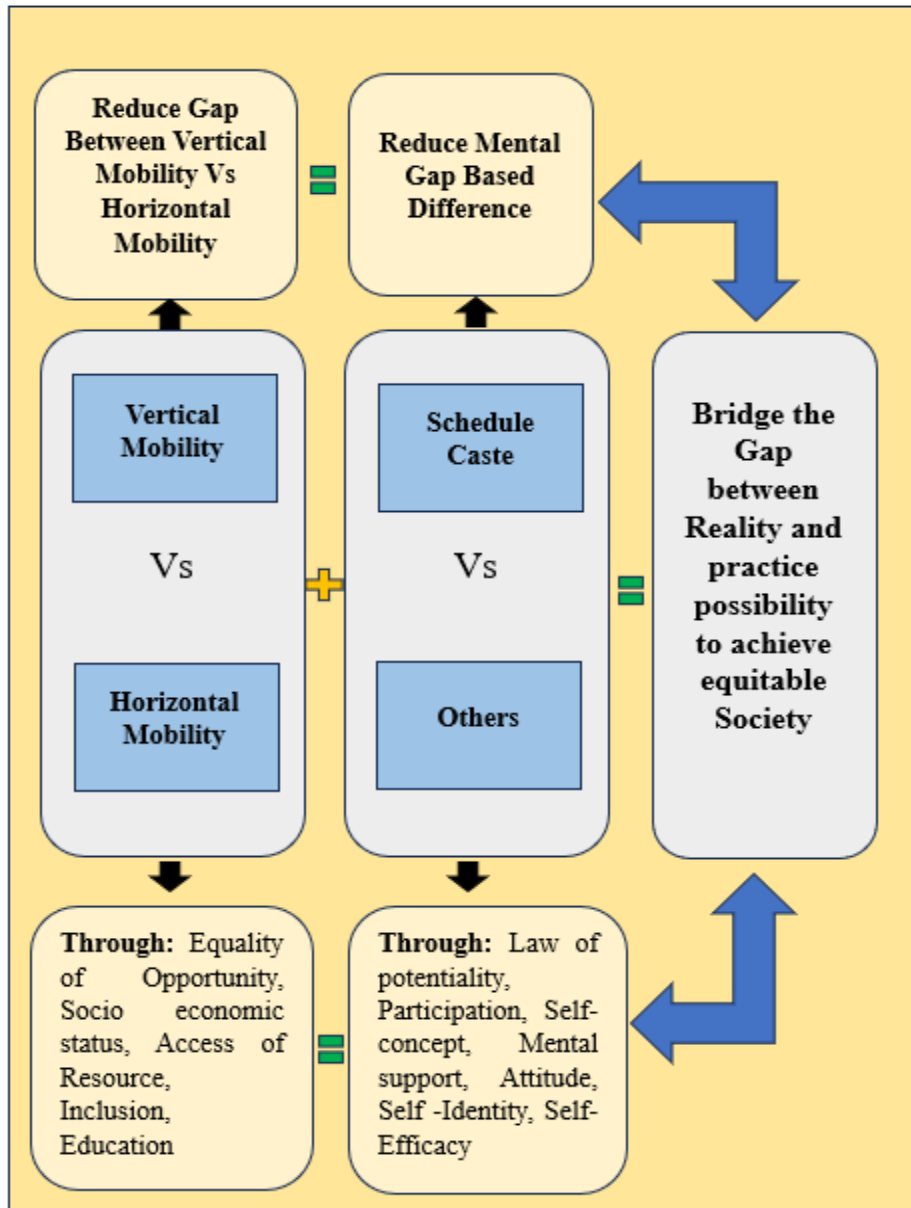
### **OPPORTUNITY-DRIVEN MOBILITY MODEL:**



1. The model delineates the interrelationships among various concepts pertaining to vertical mobility, culminating in a broader theme of fostering an equitable society.
2. Equality of Opportunity (Yellow Box): This foundational concept posits that all individuals should have equivalent prospects for pursuing opportunities without discrimination or barriers. This serves as a crucial premise for promoting fairness in society.
3. Social Mobility (Green Box): This concept refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to ascend or descend the social hierarchy. It is influenced by factors such as education, employment, and social networks. Social mobility is essential for a dynamic and equitable society, as it reflects the potential for individuals to enhance their socioeconomic status.
4. Equity of Opportunity (Blue Box): Building upon the principle of equality of opportunity, equity of opportunity considers the diverse starting points of individuals. This suggests that opportunities should not only be universally available but also accessible in a manner that accounts for individual circumstances. This concept is critical to ensure that systemic barriers do not impede progress.
5. Vertical Mobility and Equitable Society (Orange Box): This final element integrates the aforementioned concepts, advocating for a society in which individuals can ascend the social hierarchy based on merit, skills, and diligence, rather than predetermined social status. This emphasizes that a truly equitable society facilitates both social and vertical mobility, enabling all individuals to realize their potential.

**Conclusion:**

**Bridging the Mental Gap for Mobility: A Path to an Equitable Society for Scheduled Caste Students**



Creating a fair and inclusive society requires aligning the desire for upward social mobility with the realities many individuals face, especially Scheduled Caste (SC) students. Achieving this balance involves addressing two key challenges: the gap between vertical and horizontal mobility and the mental divide between SC students and others.

Reducing the mobility gap is essential for empowering individuals to break free from traditional social and economic limitations. By narrowing the differences between vertical mobility (moving up the social ladder) and horizontal mobility (maintaining the same status within a different setting), people can better pursue opportunities for upward progress. Alongside this, bridging the mental divide for SC students is equally important. This involves nurturing a healthy sense of self, encouraging participation, and offering emotional and mental support, which together help build confidence and prepare students for success.

Achieving equity also depends on ensuring equal access to resources, education, and opportunities in an inclusive environment. Support systems that promote social and economic inclusion are necessary to



create a fair playing field for all students. At the same time, empowering SC students through emotional and mental development is crucial. Strengthening their self-identity, fostering a sense of efficacy, and encouraging a positive attitude toward participation will help them overcome barriers and realize their potential.

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