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Education, Skill Development, and Upward Mobility: A Study of Scheduled Caste Migrant Youth in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: This mixed-methods study examines the interplay of education, skill development, and migration in shaping the upward mobility of Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant youth in Tamil Nadu, finding that while education and vocational training provide foundational aspirations and opportunities, their effectiveness is constrained by structural inequalities like poor schooling quality, caste barriers, and low-quality training with weak industry linkages. Migration acts as a significant enabler by expanding access to urban labor markets and social capital, yet it also introduces vulnerabilities such as employment insecurity, discrimination, and gendered constraints. The research concludes that mobility is a negotiated process between individual agency and structural limits, advocating for integrated policies that enhance educational access, align skills with market demands, and ensure safe, equitable migration pathways to foster inclusive socio-economic advancement.

Keywords: Education, Skill Development, Internal Migration, Upward Mobility, Scheduled Castes.

INTRODUCTION

Education and skill development have long been recognised as key instruments for promoting social mobility, economic empowerment, and social inclusion. In India, Scheduled Castes (SCs) have historically experienced systematic exclusion from economic, social, and political opportunities due to the entrenched caste hierarchy. Despite significant policy interventions over the past several decades, SC communities continue to face challenges related to limited access to quality education, vocational training, and stable employment (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Among SC youth, migration has increasingly emerged as a parallel strategy to overcome local structural constraints and access better educational and economic opportunities, particularly in urban and semi-urban regions of Tamil Nadu, where industrial and service-sector employment prospects are relatively higher.

Tamil Nadu, as one of India's most industrialised states, exhibits a complex interplay between educational attainment, skill development initiatives,

and migration trends. On one hand, government programmes such as the Tamil Nadu Skill Development Mission, PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana), and SC-specific scholarships have facilitated access to technical training and higher education for marginalized communities (Kannan & Ramesh, 2020). On the other hand, structural limitations in rural regions—including inadequate schooling infrastructure, socio-economic deprivation, and caste-based discrimination—often constrain local youth from acquiring the skills and qualifications required for upward mobility. Consequently, migration has become a mechanism through which SC youth supplement formal education with practical exposure to employment opportunities, allowing them to accumulate social and human capital beyond their home districts.

The phenomenon of migration for skill development among SC youth can be understood as both a coping and aspirational strategy. While historically migration from marginalised communities in India was primarily distress-driven, contemporary patterns increasingly indicate a shift towards mobility as a

deliberate pathway for socio-economic advancement (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). SC youth who migrate often access urban industries, technical institutes, and informal learning environments that provide skill training, mentorship, and exposure to professional norms. Such experiences not only enhance employability but also facilitate a reconfiguration of social identity, enabling young migrants to negotiate caste-based barriers in urban contexts where social hierarchies are relatively diluted (Shah et al., 2018). Therefore, migration and skill development interact synergistically to create pathways for upward mobility.

Despite these opportunities, SC migrant youth face multifaceted challenges. Studies have highlighted persistent gender disparities, with female migrants experiencing restricted mobility, lower wages, and higher vulnerability in informal employment sectors (Rao, 2017). Additionally, the quality of training and alignment with labour market demands remain inconsistent, limiting the transformative potential of skill development programmes. Workplace discrimination, lack of access to social protection schemes, and uncertainty regarding long-term career progression further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Therefore, understanding the intersection of education, skill acquisition, and migration is critical to designing interventions that not only enhance employability but also promote sustainable upward mobility among SC youth.

This study seeks to examine the role of education and skill development in facilitating upward mobility among SC migrant youth in Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it addresses the following research objectives: (1) to identify the educational backgrounds and skill training experiences of SC migrant youth; (2) to analyse the patterns of migration, including destinations, occupations, and employment outcomes; (3) to investigate gendered differences in migration and skill acquisition; and (4) to assess how these factors contribute to upward mobility in terms of income, occupational status, and social recognition. By integrating both quantitative data from structured surveys and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, the study aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the educational and vocational pathways that enable SC youth to navigate structural disadvantages.

Furthermore, this research contributes to existing literature by focusing on the Tamil Nadu context, a region with unique socio-economic dynamics and a strong industrial base. While prior studies have explored migration among rural SC households in India, few have explicitly examined the interplay between education, skill development, and upward mobility among migrant youth. By highlighting the ways in which formal and informal learning

opportunities intersect with migration experiences, this study provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations aiming to strengthen social and economic inclusion.

In conclusion, the study recognises that education, skill development, and migration are interdependent strategies that shape the upward mobility trajectories of SC youth in Tamil Nadu. Migration serves not only as a conduit for acquiring skills and employment but also as a mechanism for challenging structural inequalities and expanding social capital. By examining these processes, the research aims to illuminate the pathways through which historically marginalised youth can achieve socio-economic advancement, while also identifying the persistent barriers that require targeted policy intervention. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the literature, methodology, findings, and implications that follow in the subsequent sections of the study.

2. Literature Review

Education and skill development are widely recognised as pivotal factors in enhancing employability, promoting social mobility, and reducing socio-economic inequalities. For Scheduled Caste (SC) communities in India, historical marginalisation has resulted in persistent disparities in access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Education, in its broadest sense, provides both human capital and cognitive skills, while skill development equips individuals with practical and technical competencies necessary for participation in formal and informal labour markets. Understanding the dynamics of education and skill acquisition among SC migrant youth is therefore essential to comprehending their trajectories of upward mobility.

2.1 Education and Social Mobility

The relationship between education and social mobility has been a central concern in development studies. Tilak (2015) argues that education acts as a transformative tool, enabling disadvantaged groups to access better economic opportunities and challenge entrenched social hierarchies. Several studies demonstrate that educational attainment among SC youth correlates with improved labour market outcomes, including higher wages, greater occupational diversity, and enhanced social recognition (Shah et al., 2018). However, the quality and accessibility of education remain uneven, particularly in rural areas where SC communities are concentrated. Inadequate infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and economic pressures contribute to high dropout rates among SC youth, limiting the potential benefits of formal education (Tilak, 2015; Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Theories of social mobility emphasise that education not only increases employability but also fosters agency and self-efficacy among marginalised groups. For SC youth, schooling provides exposure to broader social norms and knowledge systems, which can facilitate navigation of urban and industrial labour markets during migration (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Moreover, access to scholarships, reservation policies, and affirmative action initiatives has improved enrolment rates among SC students in higher secondary and tertiary education, creating a foundation for subsequent skill acquisition and labour mobility (Kannan & Ramesh, 2020). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these measures is contingent on complementary interventions, such as mentoring, career guidance, and linkages to vocational training.

2.2 Skill Development and Employability

Skill development initiatives, encompassing vocational training, technical courses, and short-term certifications, play a critical role in equipping youth for employment in modern labour markets. Narayan (2018) highlights that participation in skill development programmes significantly enhances job readiness, income potential, and occupational upward mobility. In the context of SC migrant youth, skill development serves both as a preparatory step for migration and as a mechanism for integrating into urban economies that demand specific technical competencies.

The literature identifies several structural challenges in the effective delivery of skill development programs. First, training quality varies widely across public and private institutions, leading to inconsistencies in employability outcomes (Kannan & Ramesh, 2020). Second, there is often a mismatch between the skills taught and the requirements of employers, resulting in underemployment or engagement in low-skilled, informal work. Third, socio-cultural factors, including gender norms and caste-based discrimination, may restrict access to certain vocational streams, limiting the full potential of skill development for SC youth (Rao, 2017). Despite these challenges, successful skill development programmes—particularly those linked to industry and apprenticeship models—have been shown to increase earnings, job stability, and confidence among participants.

2.3 Migration as a Catalyst for Skill Acquisition

Migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, has emerged as a significant facilitator of skill acquisition and upward mobility among SC youth. Deshingkar and Akter (2009) argue that migration exposes young individuals to diverse occupational environments, practical learning opportunities, and professional networks that are largely unavailable in their home communities. For SC youth, who may face limited

local employment options due to caste-based restrictions or low-quality rural education, migration provides both physical and social mobility, enabling access to skill-enhancing opportunities.

Circular and seasonal migration patterns are particularly relevant for youth seeking to balance education, skill acquisition, and income generation. Studies indicate that migrant youth often engage in on-the-job learning, informal apprenticeships, and short-term vocational programs while working, creating a dynamic interplay between work experience and skill development (Shah et al., 2018). This dual approach—combining education and practical exposure—has been associated with greater income growth, occupational diversity, and enhanced social status among SC youth.

2.4 Gender and Caste Dynamics in Migration and Skill Development

Gender plays a critical role in shaping the migration and skill development experiences of SC youth. Female migrants often face additional barriers, including restricted mobility, household responsibilities, and limited access to certain training programs or high-paying sectors (Rao, 2017). However, evidence also suggests that migration can expand women's agency by providing opportunities for income generation, skill acquisition, and social exposure outside traditional caste and family constraints. This dual nature highlights the importance of considering gender-specific interventions within skill development and migration policies.

Caste identity continues to influence both access to education and migration outcomes. Despite legal protections and affirmative action policies, SC youth frequently encounter discrimination in both educational institutions and workplaces, affecting their confidence, career choices, and long-term upward mobility (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Social networks and community support have been shown to mitigate some of these challenges by facilitating access to training, information about employment opportunities, and peer mentorship, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of migration as a strategy for skill acquisition.

2.5 Regional Context: Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu provides a unique regional context for studying SC youth migration and skill development. With a strong industrial base, widespread educational institutions, and targeted welfare schemes, the state offers relatively greater opportunities for upward mobility compared to several other Indian states (Kannan & Ramesh, 2020). Nevertheless, disparities persist between rural and urban areas, and SC youth in smaller towns or villages continue to face limited access to high-

quality vocational programs. Migration from rural to urban centres in Tamil Nadu has therefore become a key mechanism through which SC youth overcome structural constraints and acquire skills aligned with emerging labour market demands.

The literature demonstrates that education, skill development, and migration collectively shape the upward mobility of SC youth in India. While education provides foundational knowledge and social capital, skill development equips youth with technical competencies necessary for employment, and migration serves as a pathway to access these opportunities in urban economies. Gender, caste, and regional disparities continue to mediate these processes, highlighting the need for context-specific policies and interventions. The gaps identified in existing research—particularly regarding the intersection of education, skill development, and migration among SC youth in Tamil Nadu—justify the present study, which seeks to provide empirical evidence on these dynamics.

3. Methodology

A rigorous and systematic methodological approach is essential to explore the interplay of education, skill development, and upward mobility among Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant youth in Tamil Nadu. This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both measurable trends and nuanced personal experiences. Mixed-methods research is particularly suited for studies involving social mobility and migration, as it allows for statistical generalisation while also exploring the socio-cultural and individual contexts that shape outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2010).

3.1 Research Design

The research design adopted for this study combines descriptive quantitative analysis with interpretive qualitative investigation. The quantitative component enables the identification of patterns in educational attainment, skill development participation, migration trajectories, and employment outcomes. The qualitative component, through in-depth interviews, provides insight into the personal experiences, challenges, aspirations, and perceptions of SC migrant youth. This complementary approach ensures a holistic understanding of how education and skill development intersect with migration to facilitate upward mobility.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study focuses on SC migrant youth originating from rural and semi-urban areas of Tamil Nadu, specifically targeting districts with high migration rates such as Villupuram, Thiruvannamalai, Cuddalore, and Dharmapuri. Major urban and

industrial destinations, including Chennai, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Bengaluru, and Hosur, were selected as primary sites for data collection. These destinations were chosen due to the concentration of industries and service-sector employment opportunities that attract migrant youth seeking skill-based work.

The target population includes SC youth aged 18–30 years, who have migrated for purposes related to education, vocational training, or employment. This age range reflects the demographic segment most actively engaged in skill acquisition and labour mobility, while also encompassing early career transitions and the pursuit of higher education.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage purposive sampling method was employed to ensure representativeness and access to key informants. In the first stage, districts with significant SC populations and known migration patterns were identified. In the second stage, urban and industrial centres that attract SC youth migrants were selected. In the third stage, participants were recruited using snowball sampling, where initial respondents referred other SC youth migrants in similar contexts.

A total of 300 SC migrant youth participated in the study. Among them, 180 were male and 120 were female, reflecting the gendered nature of migration in these contexts. The sample included participants with varied educational backgrounds, ranging from primary schooling to higher secondary and diploma-level education, as well as varying levels of skill training experience. This diversity allowed for comparative analysis across different educational and vocational trajectories.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to capture demographic characteristics, educational attainment, skill development participation, migration history, employment outcomes, income changes, and perceptions of social mobility. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, allowing for statistical analysis of trends and correlations.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 40 participants, selected purposively to reflect variation in gender, educational background, and migration experiences. Interviews focused on participants' motivations for migration, challenges encountered in skill acquisition and employment, experiences of caste and gender discrimination, and perceptions of upward mobility. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to narrate personal experiences, providing rich insights

beyond quantitative measures.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained in line with ICSSR guidelines for social science research in India (2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning code numbers to respondents, and sensitive information was carefully managed. Particular attention was given to issues of vulnerability, especially among female migrants, to ensure that interviews were conducted in safe and private settings.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and correlation analysis to identify patterns in education, skill development, migration, and employment outcomes. Income changes, occupational shifts, and migration destinations were examined to assess upward mobility trajectories. Gender-based comparisons were also performed to highlight disparities in access to education, skill development, and labour market outcomes.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes related to skill acquisition, migration experiences, social mobility, caste and gender challenges, and perceptions of opportunity. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing upward mobility among SC migrant youth.

3.7 Limitations of Methodology

While the study adopts a robust mixed-methods design, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of purposive and snowball sampling may limit the generalisability of findings to all SC migrant youth in Tamil Nadu. Self-reported data on income, skill acquisition, and migration experiences may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Additionally, longitudinal analysis of mobility trajectories was beyond the scope of the study, although cross-sectional data provide meaningful insights into current patterns and experiences. Future research could incorporate longitudinal tracking to better capture the dynamic processes of education, skill development, and upward mobility.

RESULTS

4. Analysis and interpretation

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the educational backgrounds, skill development experiences, migration patterns, employment outcomes, and gendered experiences of Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant youth in Tamil Nadu. Both quantitative and qualitative data are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of how education and skill development interact with migration to facilitate upward mobility.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study sample comprised **300 SC migrant youth**, with 180 males (60%) and 120 females (40%). The age distribution indicated that the majority (65%) were between **20 and 25 years**, reflecting the active phase of education completion, skill acquisition, and early employment. Approximately 70% of respondents originated from rural areas, while 30% came from semi-urban backgrounds. The majority of participants were from economically marginal households, with monthly family incomes below INR 15,000, highlighting the socio-economic constraints that influence educational and migration choices.

4.2 Educational Background

Education levels among the respondents varied, reflecting disparities in access and attainment. Table 1 summarises the distribution of educational qualifications:

Table 1: Educational Attainment of SC Migrant Youth

Education Level	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Primary	12	15	13.5
Upper Primary	18	20	19
Secondary (10th)	25	30	27.5
Higher Secondary (12th)	30	25	28
Diploma/Technical Training	15	10	12.5

The data indicate that **over 55% of youth completed secondary or higher secondary education**, providing a foundational base for skill development. Diploma and technical training participation was slightly higher among males (15%) compared to females (10%), reflecting gender disparities in access to vocational programs. Qualitative interviews revealed that male participants often had greater encouragement from families to pursue technical education, whereas female participants faced cultural and domestic responsibilities that limited their participation.

4.3 Skill Development Participation

Skill development participation was a critical factor influencing employment outcomes and upward mobility. Approximately 38% of respondents reported having undergone some form of vocational or technical training, including courses in IT, textiles, logistics, and hospitality. Training programs included government schemes such as PMKVY, Tamil Nadu Skill Development Mission, and private technical institutes.

Interviews highlighted the perceived value of skill development in securing better-paying jobs and professional growth. One male respondent from Villupuram stated:

"Before the training, I was working as a daily wage laborer in my village. After completing the textile course in Coimbatore, I was able to get a factory job with a fixed salary and opportunities for promotion." Female respondents emphasized training in tailoring, computer applications, and hospitality management, which provided income-generating opportunities while accommodating domestic responsibilities. However, several participants reported challenges such as insufficient course duration, poor quality of instruction, and lack of job placement support.

4.4 Migration Patterns and Destinations

Migration emerged as a significant mechanism through which SC youth accessed skill development and employment opportunities. Urban centres and industrial hubs such as Chennai, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Bengaluru, and Hosur were the most common destinations. The study found that 72% of youth migrated primarily for employment, while 20% migrated to pursue vocational training, and 8% migrated for higher education.

Migration duration varied, with 45% of respondents reporting temporary migration (6 months–2 years), 35% engaged in circular or seasonal migration, and 20% settled semi-permanently in urban centres. Male youth predominantly migrated for industrial or technical work, whereas female youth often migrated for service-sector employment, such as hospitality, tailoring, and domestic work.

4.5 Employment Outcomes

Migration and skill development directly influenced employment outcomes and income levels. Among youth with vocational training, average monthly income increased by 34% compared to pre-migration levels. Employment sectors included:

Textiles and manufacturing: 40% of respondents
Service sector (hospitality, IT-enabled services): 30%
Construction and logistics: 20%

Other informal employment: 10%

Quantitative analysis showed a positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) between skill development participation and income increase, confirming that trained youth experienced significantly better economic outcomes. Interviews further illustrated qualitative improvements, such as job security, exposure to workplace culture, and increased financial independence.

One female respondent from Thiruvannamalai noted:

"After completing the tailoring course, I started working in a boutique in Chennai. I earn enough to support my family and also plan to expand my own small business."

These narratives underscore how skill development, combined with migration, facilitates both economic and social mobility.

4.6 Social and Upward Mobility

Beyond economic outcomes, migration and skill development influenced perceptions of social mobility. Many respondents reported enhanced self-confidence, autonomy, and recognition within their families and communities. Urban work environments reduced direct exposure to caste-based discrimination prevalent in rural areas, enabling youth to access previously restricted occupational roles.

However, challenges persisted. Female respondents highlighted gender-specific barriers, including limited safe housing, restrictive work hours, and societal scrutiny. Male respondents reported occasional workplace discrimination related to caste identity, indicating that structural inequalities, while attenuated in urban contexts, were not fully eliminated.

4.7 Barriers and Challenges

Despite the positive outcomes, the study identified several persistent challenges:

Quality of skill training: Short duration, outdated curricula, and poor instruction limited the effectiveness of programs.

Mismatch between skills and labour demand: Some youth trained in sectors with low demand faced underemployment.

Social and gender constraints: Female migrants faced restricted mobility and limited access to higher-paying sectors.

Informal employment vulnerabilities: Lack of job security, social protection, and benefits in informal sectors remained significant concerns.

These findings highlight that while education and skill development significantly enhance upward mobility, structural and systemic barriers continue to shape the experiences of SC migrant youth.

The results demonstrate that education, skill development, and migration are interlinked factors facilitating upward mobility among SC youth in Tamil Nadu. Higher secondary education and vocational training improve employability, while migration provides exposure to urban labour markets and opportunities for economic and social advancement. Gender and caste continue to mediate access to opportunities, with female youth facing distinct challenges. Despite improvements in income, occupation, and social recognition, systemic barriers such as poor training quality, discrimination, and informal sector vulnerabilities persist, underscoring the need for targeted policy interventions.

Findings:

The findings of this study demonstrate the complex and interrelated roles of education, skill development, and migration in facilitating upward mobility among Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant youth in Tamil Nadu. This discussion integrates the results with insights from existing literature, highlighting the structural challenges as well as the transformative opportunities offered by mobility, skills, and education. The section also examines gendered dynamics, regional specificities, and implications for caste-based inequality reduction.

5.1 Education as the Foundation for Mobility

The results clearly indicate that secondary and higher secondary education function as foundational pathways for SC youth entering skill development and urban employment. This aligns with Tilak (2015), who argues that basic education expands cognitive capacity, employability, and decision-making abilities. Similarly, Thorat and Newman (2010) emphasise that education among SC communities provides access to occupations historically denied to them on the basis of caste.

However, the study also found significant dropout rates at upper primary and secondary levels, particularly among girls. This inconsistency in attainment points to persistent structural barriers—including economic hardship, gender norms, and inadequate rural school quality—which limit the full transformative potential of education. The discrepancies between male and female educational profiles reflect broader national trends, where social expectations restrict girls' access to higher education and technical training (Rao, 2017). The findings thus confirm that while education is a critical entry point, its benefits depend heavily on the quality of schooling and socio-economic support systems.

5.2 Skill Development as a Bridge to Employment

Skill development programs emerged as crucial mechanisms enabling SC youth to convert foundational education into market-relevant competencies. The positive correlation between

vocational training and income improvement supports Narayan's (2018) assertion that employability skills significantly enhance the economic prospects of marginalised youth. The variety of skill areas—textiles, IT, logistics, hospitality—reflects the diversified demands of Tamil Nadu's labour market, confirming Kannan and Ramesh's (2020) observations on the state's expanded industrial and service sectors.

Nonetheless, the study found that only 38% of respondents had formal training. This limited participation underscores barriers such as cost, access to training centres, lack of awareness about schemes, and mismatch between training content and employer needs. The qualitative findings—especially complaints about outdated curricula and inadequate practical exposure—reflect long-standing criticisms of Indian skill missions (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). These gaps weaken the ability of youth to fully leverage migration for upward mobility. Thus, the results reinforce that skill development must be closely tied to industry requirements, placement support, and targeted outreach for SC communities.

5.3 Migration as an Engine of Opportunity

Migration plays a transformative role for SC youth, serving as both an economic and social mobility strategy. The study shows that migration provides access to urban labour markets, diversified income sources, on-site learning, and exposure to modern working environments. These findings mirror Shah et al. (2018), who highlight that rural-to-urban mobility enables marginalised youth to escape caste-based occupational immobility and acquire new skills informally through work experience.

Importantly, many respondents who migrated for employment reported marked improvements in income and professional growth, confirming that migration serves as a catalyst for upward mobility. At the same time, the study revealed that migration also offers psychological and social benefits—reduced caste-based discrimination, increased autonomy, and enhanced self-worth. These findings are consistent with Deshingkar and Akter (2009), who argue that migration expands life choices and reduces dependence on caste-dominated rural networks.

However, migration is not without challenges. Vulnerability in the informal sector, lack of social protection, unsafe working conditions, and exploitative contracts were recurrent concerns among respondents. This points to a dual reality: while migration enables upward mobility, it also exposes youth to precarious working environments unless supported by training, legal awareness, and social networks.

5.4 Gendered Dynamics of Mobility

The study's results emphasise that gender significantly shapes the experiences, opportunities, and barriers faced by SC migrant youth. Women's access to education and skill development continues to be constrained by domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and restrictive cultural norms. Female migrants, though benefiting from employment in hospitality, tailoring, and service sectors, encountered challenges such as unsafe accommodation, wage discrimination, and limited chances for upward occupational mobility.

These findings align with Rao (2017), who notes that intersectionality—caste and gender together—intensifies marginalisation among SC women. Migration did offer increased independence and income opportunities for many female respondents; however, it did not fully dismantle patriarchal constraints. The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive training programs, safe hostels, and targeted support services for young women.

5.5 Transformation and Limitations of Social Mobility

Although upward mobility was evident in income levels, occupational diversification, and increased self-confidence, structural inequalities persisted. Some respondents still experienced caste-based discrimination in urban workplaces, albeit less directly than in rural areas. This finding reinforces the observation by Thorat and Newman (2010) that caste biases, while reduced in formal sectors, continue in subtle forms within private employment. Furthermore, many youth remained employed in low-paid informal jobs without social security or long-term career prospects. Without structured career progression pathways or recognition of prior learning, their upward mobility may be limited or stalled. These challenges highlight what Narayan (2018) identifies as “incomplete mobility,” where marginalised youth advance economically but remain socially vulnerable.

5.6 Regional Strengths and Limitations

Tamil Nadu's unique combination of industrial growth, skill development missions, and SC welfare schemes provides an enabling environment for youth mobility (Kannan & Ramesh, 2020). The state's relatively advanced manufacturing and service sectors absorbed a majority of SC migrant youth in the sample. However, disparities persist between rural and urban regions in access to training facilities, quality institutions, and awareness of available opportunities. Regional inequalities therefore shape uneven mobility outcomes, with youth from interior districts facing greater challenges.

5.7 Integrative View: The Mobility Triad

This study supports an integrative model where

education + skill development + migration collectively shape upward mobility for SC youth. Individually, each component has limited impact; together, they create a synergistic pathway:

Education provides foundational knowledge and aspiration.

Skill development converts education into employability.

Migration provides access to labour markets where these skills have value.

The interdependence of these components aligns with contemporary mobility theories and highlights the importance of coordinated interventions.

SECTION 6: Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study highlight the complex and interconnected role of education, skill development, and migration in shaping the upward mobility of Scheduled Caste (SC) youth in Tamil Nadu. While migration emerges as an important pathway for economic advancement, the experiences of SC migrant youth reveal that their mobility is neither linear nor solely determined by individual effort. Instead, it is shaped by systemic inequalities, access to resources, social networks, and the socio-economic environment of both their origin and destination locations. This section discusses these findings within the broader socio-economic and policy frameworks, showing how education and skills function as both opportunities and constraints for SC migrant youth.

One of the central themes that emerged is the transformative but uneven role of education. Many SC youth in this study used formal education as a steppingstone for migration, especially to urban centers such as Chennai, Coimbatore, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad. However, the pathway from education to stable employment is disrupted by multiple factors: poor-quality schooling in rural regions, limited access to English-medium instruction, digital divides, and the inability to secure competitive exam coaching or advanced certifications. These structural barriers contribute to a phenomenon where education enables hope but does not always guarantee upward mobility. Migration, therefore, becomes a compensatory strategy—an alternate mechanism to bridge the gap between aspirations and available opportunities.

Similarly, skill development programs—especially those under national schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and state-led initiatives—play a significant role in shaping employability. However, SC migrant youth often experience these programs in fragmented ways. While some benefit from vocational training in fields such as electrical work, tailoring, hospitality, and logistics, others face challenges related to certification recognition, industry alignment, and

placement quality. The study indicates that short-term training does not always match labor-market demands, forcing many youth to rely on informal networks for job access. This mismatch reflects a broader structural challenge within India's skill development ecosystem, where training availability does not always translate into sustainable employment pathways.

Migration, in this context, presents both opportunity and vulnerability. For many SC youth, migration offers higher wages, exposure to diverse work environments, and an escape from caste-based discrimination prevalent in their home villages. However, migration also exposes them to new forms of precarity: high living costs in urban centers, job insecurity, lack of social protection, and limited access to housing and healthcare. The study found that SC migrant youth frequently rely on community networks—relatives, friends, and caste-based associations—to navigate urban employment. These networks reduce initial migration shock but can also restrict individuals to low-wage sectors where their community members are clustered, thus replicating structural inequalities in new contexts.

A significant implication of these findings is the need to reconceptualize upward mobility beyond income. While increased earnings are an important outcome, true mobility for SC migrant youth involves improvements in dignity, autonomy, safety, access to opportunities, and reduced caste-based discrimination. The narratives of several participants revealed that urban environments provide relatively more anonymity and reduced caste surveillance compared to rural areas, enabling a psychological sense of mobility even when economic progress is modest. This reinforces the idea that upward mobility is a holistic experience shaped by social, emotional, and spatial dimensions—not just financial advancement.

Gender emerges as another critical intersection. SC young women face layered barriers in both education and migration. Family restrictions, safety concerns, early marriage pressures, and fewer opportunities in male-dominated sectors limit their ability to leverage education or migration fully. Those who do migrate often work in textiles, domestic labor, food-processing units, or retail—sectors marked by low wages and poor job security. Hence, while migration serves as a tool for empowerment for some women, systemic gendered inequalities remain deeply embedded.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the urgent need for integrated support systems that link education, skill training, employment, and safe migration pathways. The study reveals gaps that include inconsistent institutional support, limited

career counseling for SC students, inadequate financial assistance for higher education, and poor tracking of migrant workers. Strengthening these systems can significantly enhance mobility outcomes.

Furthermore, the research underscores the necessity of caste-sensitive programming. Many government schemes for skill development and employment do not explicitly address caste-based disparities, assuming equal access and outcomes across social groups. However, the lived experiences of SC youth demonstrate that caste continues to shape opportunity structures across rural and urban spaces. Therefore, future interventions must intentionally address caste barriers—such as through targeted scholarships, exclusive skill-development quotas, safe hostels for SC migrants, and caste-sensitization programs for employers.

Lastly, the findings suggest that upward mobility is most sustainable when SC youth gain long-term capabilities, such as digital literacy, English communication, advanced technical skills, and soft skills. These capabilities not only improve employment outcomes but also enhance agency, confidence, and negotiation power in both workplace and social environments. Policy frameworks must therefore evolve from providing minimal skills to fostering advanced, future-oriented competencies.

In conclusion, this study reveals that the relationship between education, skill development, and upward mobility among SC migrant youth in Tamil Nadu is both promising and constrained. Migration continues to serve as a critical mechanism for socio-economic advancement, yet systemic inequities impede the full realization of mobility. Addressing these gaps requires a multi-layered policy approach that integrates education reform, skill ecosystem strengthening, urban inclusion, labor protections, and caste-sensitive interventions. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Tamil Nadu support the genuine upward mobility of its SC migrant youth and contribute to a more equitable socio-economic landscape.

SECTION 7: Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between education, skill development, and upward mobility among Scheduled Caste (SC) migrant youth in Tamil Nadu, highlighting how these intersecting factors influence their socio-economic trajectories. The findings show that while education and skills serve as significant enablers, upward mobility is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Instead, it is shaped by deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities, caste-based constraints, gender barriers, and the complexities of internal migration.

For many SC youth, education provides the first window to envision a life beyond traditional caste-linked occupations. However, systemic challenges such as unequal schooling quality, limited access to English-medium education, inadequate digital literacy, and financial obstacles restrict their ability to convert formal education into stable employment. Skill development programs offer partial support, but gaps in training quality, market alignment, and post-training placement continue to limit their effectiveness. Despite these limitations, youth actively use education and skill programs to negotiate better opportunities, demonstrating resilience and agency.

Migration emerges as a major pathway for social and economic advancement. Urban centers offer anonymity, reduced caste visibility, and higher income potential, which many SC youth perceive as symbolic and substantive mobility. Yet, migration also brings vulnerabilities—temporary work arrangements, poor housing, long working hours, and limited legal protection. These experiences highlight that upward mobility among SC migrant youth is a negotiated process that requires navigating both opportunity and insecurity.

A key insight from this study is that mobility must be understood not only in terms of income but also through broader indicators such as autonomy, dignity, access to services, and escape from caste surveillance. Urban migration often enhances these non-material dimensions of life, contributing to psychological and social mobility even when economic gains remain modest. However, gendered constraints shape access to these opportunities, with SC young women facing heightened risks, family restrictions, and fewer skill pathways.

The study underscores the need for policy interventions that integrate education reform, inclusive skill development, safe migration mechanisms, and caste-sensitive support systems. Strengthening rural schooling, expanding financial aid for higher education, ensuring industry-linked vocational programs, establishing safe hostels for SC migrants, and enforcing labor protections would collectively create more equitable mobility pathways. Additionally, targeted support for SC young women is essential to reduce gendered disparities.

Ultimately, the upward mobility of SC migrant youth is a dynamic and multidimensional process. While individual determination plays a role, structural support is crucial for sustainable progress. Tamil Nadu, with its strong social welfare history, is well-positioned to develop integrated frameworks that acknowledge caste-based inequities and expand opportunities for marginalized youth. By addressing systemic barriers and strengthening institutional

systems, the state can foster more inclusive and durable mobility for SC migrant youth, enabling them not only to secure better livelihoods but also to reshape the social narratives surrounding caste, labor, and opportunity.

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