



Caste, Class, and Migration: Social Movements for Equality and Justice

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Abstract : This paper examines the intersections of caste, class, and migration, and how these interlocking structures shape social movements aimed at equity and justice. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from sociology and political economy, this study explores how caste and class hierarchies influence migratory patterns, and how migrations — internal and international — generate new forms of collective action. We highlight case studies from India and South Asia to demonstrate the role of migrant communities in advancing social justice, focusing on grassroots mobilization, labor movements, and identity politics.

Keywords: Caste, Migration, Marginalization, Urbanization, Labour Movements, MGNREGA

1. Introduction: Migration has long been a central feature of human societies. While many studies focus on economic drivers of migration, this paper emphasizes the roles of caste and class in shaping both the experience of migration and the social movements that emerge from migrant communities. In contexts of segmented labor markets and entrenched social hierarchies, migrants often organize not only for economic rights but also for recognition and justice.

1.1 Definitions and Scope: Caste: A hierarchical system of social stratification prevalent in South Asia, especially India, affecting access to resources, occupation, and social capital.

Class: Economic and social positioning based on relations to production, income, and wealth.

Migration: Movement of people across regions — rural to urban, inter-state, or international — often shaped by structural inequalities.

2. Theoretical Framework: A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between social structures and human experiences. In studies dealing with caste, class, and migration, it is essential to integrate multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret the dynamics of inequality, social mobility, and identity formation. The ideas developed by scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar, Karl Marx, Kimberlé Crenshaw,



Douglas S. Massey, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller help explain how social stratification and mobility are shaped by historical, economic, and cultural processes.

2.1 Caste and Class in Social Theory: The concepts of caste and class represent two important frameworks for analyzing social stratification and inequality. While both systems describe hierarchies within society, they differ in their historical origins, mechanisms of operation, and implications for social mobility.

The sociological analysis of caste in the Indian context is strongly influenced by the work of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers, deeply embedded in the religious and cultural fabric of Indian society. According to Ambedkar, caste is a rigid and hereditary system that determines an individual's social status, occupation, and access to resources from birth. In his writings, especially *Annihilation of Caste* and other works compiled in 1990 editions of his collected writings, he emphasized that caste operates through social exclusion, endogamy, and hierarchical ranking.

Dr. Ambedkar believed that caste inequality is fundamentally linked to social power and domination. It prevents social mobility and perpetuates discrimination against marginalized communities, particularly the so-called “untouchable” castes (Dalits). In this sense, caste is not simply a cultural phenomenon but a structural mechanism of oppression that regulates access to education, property, and political power.

In contrast, the theory of class developed by Karl Marx in his seminal work *Capital* (1867) focuses on economic relations and the organization of production. Marx argued that society is divided into classes based on ownership of the means of production. In capitalist societies, the primary classes are the bourgeoisie, who own capital and production, and the proletariat, who sell their labor to survive. Class conflict between these groups forms the basis of social change.

From a Marxist perspective, inequality arises from exploitation within economic systems. Workers produce value but receive only a portion of it as wages, while capitalists accumulate surplus value as profit. Marx believed that this contradiction would eventually lead to class struggle and potentially revolutionary transformation of society.

Although Ambedkar and Marx approached inequality from different perspectives, their theories can be viewed as complementary. Marx emphasized economic structures and class exploitation, whereas Ambedkar highlighted social and cultural hierarchies rooted in caste. In societies like India, caste and class often intersect. For instance, historically marginalized castes frequently occupy economically disadvantaged positions, demonstrating how social and economic hierarchies reinforce each other.



To further analyze such overlapping systems of inequality, the concept of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991 provides an important analytical tool. Intersectionality argues that different forms of social inequality—such as caste, class, gender, and race—do not operate independently but intersect to shape individuals' experiences. Applying intersectionality to caste and class reveals how individuals belonging to marginalized caste groups may also experience economic exploitation, gender discrimination, or other forms of structural disadvantage simultaneously. This framework allows researchers to move beyond single-axis explanations and understand how multiple social identities interact to produce complex patterns of marginalization and privilege.

Thus, integrating the theories of Ambedkar, Marx, and Crenshaw enables a more comprehensive understanding of social stratification. It highlights how economic structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices together shape opportunities, power relations, and patterns of inequality in society.

2.2 Migration as Social Action : Migration has traditionally been explained through economic theories that focus on wage differences, employment opportunities, and labor market demand. However, contemporary sociological research suggests that migration is far more complex than a simple response to economic incentives. It is a social process shaped by historical conditions, political structures, cultural identities, and power relations.

The sociological approach to migration advanced by Douglas S. Massey and his colleagues in 1993 emphasizes that migration should be understood as part of broader social networks and institutional structures. According to this perspective, migration decisions are rarely made by individuals in isolation. Instead, they are influenced by family ties, community connections, and previously established migration pathways.

Migrant networks play a crucial role in facilitating migration by providing information, financial support, and emotional assistance to new migrants. When individuals from a particular community migrate to a destination region, they often create support systems that reduce the risks and costs associated with migration. Over time, these networks expand and make migration more accessible to other members of the community.

Massey and his colleagues describe this process as cumulative causation, meaning that each act of migration increases the likelihood of further migration. As networks grow stronger, migration becomes a self-sustaining social phenomenon rather than a purely economic decision.

Another important dimension of migration is its relationship with identity and collective consciousness. Migrants often experience discrimination, cultural adjustment challenges, and



economic exploitation in their host societies. These experiences can foster a shared sense of identity and solidarity among migrant communities.

According to migration scholars Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller in their influential work *The Age of Migration* (2009), migration should be viewed as a process deeply connected to globalization, political power, and social transformation. Migrant communities frequently become spaces where new forms of political awareness and social mobilization emerge. For example, migrant workers may organize labor unions, community associations, or advocacy groups to protect their rights and improve their working conditions. In this way, migration not only reshapes economic structures but also contributes to the formation of new social movements and political identities.

Furthermore, migration often transforms both the origin and destination societies. In the place of origin, remittances and transnational connections can influence local economies, education patterns, and social aspirations. In the destination society, migrants contribute to labor markets, cultural diversity, and demographic changes.

Thus, migration should be understood as social action embedded in networks, institutions, and power relations, rather than merely a response to economic incentives. The theoretical contributions of Massey, Castles, and Miller help highlight how migration processes interact with broader social structures, including caste, class, and identity politics.

3. Historical Context: Caste, Class, and Mobility in India : Understanding the relationship between caste, class, and migration in India requires a historical perspective. Indian society has long been structured through a complex system of social stratification in which caste hierarchy determined access to land, education, and economic opportunities. Over time, economic transformations such as agrarian changes, industrialization, and urbanization have influenced patterns of social mobility and migration. However, these changes have not completely dismantled traditional hierarchies; instead, caste and class often continue to intersect in shaping opportunities and constraints for marginalized communities.

The historical development of migration in India is closely connected with rural poverty, unequal land distribution, and the gradual expansion of urban labor markets. The works of scholars such as John Harriss and Jan Breman have highlighted how structural inequalities in rural and urban India contributed to the large-scale migration of lower caste and economically disadvantaged populations.

3.1 Rural Marginalization and Out-Migration: Rural India has historically been characterized by unequal land ownership and rigid caste-based occupational divisions. Traditionally, upper caste groups controlled most of the agricultural land and economic



resources, while lower caste communities, including Dalits and Adivasis, were often confined to landless labor or menial occupations. This structural inequality created long-term conditions of economic vulnerability and social marginalization.

During the mid-twentieth century, the introduction of modern agricultural techniques and policies associated with the Green Revolution transformed many parts of rural India. Although the Green Revolution increased agricultural productivity, its benefits were unevenly distributed. Wealthier farmers who owned large tracts of land and had access to irrigation, credit, and modern technology benefited significantly, while small and marginal farmers often struggled to keep pace with the rising costs of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, and machinery.

According to the analysis of John Harriss (1982), the Green Revolution intensified existing rural inequalities. Many small farmers and landless laborers found themselves pushed further into economic distress due to mechanization, declining employment opportunities in agriculture, and growing indebtedness. These conditions contributed to agrarian distress, forcing many rural households to seek alternative sources of income outside their villages.

For marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, the situation was particularly severe. Historically excluded from land ownership and social power, these groups often depended on seasonal agricultural labor or traditional caste-based occupations. However, economic modernization disrupted these traditional occupations without providing sufficient alternative employment opportunities within rural areas.

In many regions, processes of land dispossession further exacerbated their vulnerability. Expansion of commercial agriculture, development projects, and changes in land policies sometimes led to the displacement of tribal populations and small farmers. Without access to secure land rights or stable livelihoods, many individuals from these communities were compelled to migrate to nearby towns or distant cities in search of work.

Migration thus became an important survival strategy for marginalized rural populations. Seasonal and circular migration patterns emerged in which individuals temporarily moved to urban areas or industrial regions during periods of agricultural inactivity. These migrants typically worked in construction, brick kilns, factories, and other forms of low-paid manual labor.

Therefore, rural marginalization played a crucial role in shaping migration flows in India. Structural inequalities in land ownership, combined with the uneven effects of agricultural modernization, pushed large numbers of lower caste and tribal populations into

migrant labor markets. This process illustrates how caste and class hierarchies in rural society influenced patterns of mobility and economic survival.

3.2 Urbanization and Labor Markets: The rapid expansion of cities in post-independence India created new economic opportunities, particularly in the industrial and service sectors. Urbanization accelerated after the 1960s due to industrial growth, infrastructure development, and increasing demand for labor in construction, manufacturing, and urban services. Cities became important centers of employment for rural migrants seeking better livelihoods.

However, the urban labor market was not a neutral or egalitarian space. Migrants entering cities often found themselves occupying the lowest tiers of the labor hierarchy. Most migrants from rural areas lacked formal education, technical skills, or social connections that could help them access better employment opportunities. As a result, they were concentrated in informal and unskilled sectors, where wages were low and job security was minimal.

The sociological research of Jan Breman (1996) provides valuable insights into the structure of urban labor markets in India. Breman argued that the growth of urban industries and construction activities relied heavily on migrant workers from marginalized rural backgrounds. These workers formed a large reserve labor force that could be hired temporarily and dismissed easily according to economic demand.

Despite the apparent anonymity of urban environments, caste identities often continued to influence employment opportunities and workplace relationships. Employers sometimes preferred workers from specific caste backgrounds for certain types of labor, perpetuating occupational segregation even in urban settings. For example, migrants from historically marginalized castes were often confined to physically demanding and low-status jobs such as sanitation work, construction labor, or domestic service.

Furthermore, migrant workers frequently lived in informal settlements or slums with limited access to basic services such as sanitation, healthcare, and education. These living conditions reinforced their social and economic vulnerability within the urban environment. Many migrants also lacked legal protection, formal contracts, or access to labor unions, which made them susceptible to exploitation by employers and contractors.

Urbanization, therefore, created both opportunities and challenges for marginalized communities. On one hand, migration to cities offered the possibility of earning cash income and escaping some of the rigid social restrictions of village life. On the other hand, structural inequalities in urban labor markets often reproduced patterns of exploitation and marginalization.

4. Migration and Social Movements: Migration has played a significant role in shaping social and political movements across the world. When individuals and communities migrate in search of employment or better living conditions, they often encounter new forms of inequality, exploitation, and social exclusion. These experiences frequently lead to collective awareness and organized resistance. Migrant workers, particularly those belonging to marginalized social groups, have historically formed movements to demand fair wages, safe working conditions, social recognition, and protection from discrimination.

In the Indian context, migration has often been closely connected with struggles related to caste and class inequality. Migrant workers from historically disadvantaged communities—especially Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized groups—have been active participants in labor movements, urban protests, and identity-based mobilizations. The research of scholars such as Satish Deshpande, Gail Omvedt, and Sarabjit Singh Dhillon highlights how migration has contributed to the formation of collective political consciousness and social activism among marginalized populations.

4.1 Labor Movements: Migration has historically been a central factor in the development of labor movements. When rural workers migrate to cities, they enter industrial and informal labor markets where they often face poor wages, unsafe working conditions, and lack of legal protections. These challenges frequently encourage migrant workers to organize collectively in order to defend their rights and improve their livelihoods.

According to the sociological analysis of Satish Deshpande (2000), migrant workers have played an important role in shaping labor mobilization in urban India. Migration brings together individuals from diverse social and regional backgrounds who share similar experiences of economic exploitation and social marginalization. These shared experiences can foster solidarity and collective action among workers.

In many urban industries—such as construction, manufacturing, transportation, and domestic work—migrant labor forms the backbone of the workforce. However, these workers often operate within the informal sector, where employment contracts are weak or absent and workers lack access to social security benefits. As a result, migrant laborers have frequently organized protests, strikes, and union movements to demand better working conditions.

Labor mobilization among migrant workers often addresses multiple issues simultaneously. Workers demand higher wages, safer workplaces, housing facilities, healthcare access, and recognition of their dignity as workers and citizens. Importantly, these labor movements also challenge caste-based discrimination that persists within urban labor markets.

Although cities are often seen as spaces of anonymity and opportunity, caste identities can continue to influence hiring practices, job assignments, and social relations among workers. Migrant labor movements therefore frequently combine economic demands with struggles against social discrimination. In this way, migration becomes a catalyst for broader movements advocating social justice and equality.

Case Study: Construction Workers in Maharashtra: The construction sector in Maharashtra provides a clear example of how migrant labor can lead to collective mobilization. Rapid urban expansion in cities such as Mumbai, Pune, and Nashik has created a strong demand for construction workers. Much of this labor force consists of migrants from rural districts of Maharashtra as well as neighbouring states such as Karnataka, Telangana, and Bihar.

A large proportion of these workers belong to Dalit and other socially marginalized communities. They often perform physically demanding and hazardous tasks such as carrying heavy materials, operating machinery, and working at heights with minimal safety equipment. In many cases, they are paid low wages and lack access to proper housing, sanitation, and medical facilities.

In response to these conditions, migrant construction workers have formed labor unions and community organizations to advocate for their rights. These organizations demand fair wages, improved workplace safety standards, access to government welfare schemes, and protection from discrimination. Worker collectives have also campaigned for the implementation of labor laws designed to protect construction workers, including social security benefits and accident compensation.

These movements are not limited to economic issues alone. They also address broader questions of urban inclusion. Migrant workers often live in temporary settlements or informal housing colonies on the outskirts of cities, where they face eviction threats and lack access to essential services. Labor movements therefore intersect with broader struggles against urban exclusion and social marginalization.

Through protests, negotiations, and advocacy campaigns, migrant construction workers in Maharashtra have contributed to raising awareness about labor rights and the need for more inclusive urban policies.

4.2 Caste-Based Mobilization: Migration has also played an important role in the development of caste-based social movements. Urban environments often bring together individuals from marginalized caste backgrounds who share experiences of discrimination and economic hardship. This shared environment can foster political awareness and collective mobilization aimed at challenging caste hierarchies.



One of the most significant examples of such mobilization is the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in the early 1970s. The movement originated among Dalit youth in urban centers such as Mumbai and was influenced by global radical movements and anti-racist struggles. Many of the activists involved were migrants or children of migrants who had moved to cities in search of education and employment.

According to the research of Gail Omvedt (1994), the Dalit Panthers represented a new form of political activism that combined struggles against caste oppression with critiques of economic exploitation. The movement drew inspiration from the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar and emphasized the need for radical social transformation to dismantle caste-based discrimination. The Dalit Panthers used literature, cultural expression, and political activism to raise awareness about the everyday experiences of violence, discrimination, and exclusion faced by Dalit communities. Their writings and public protests highlighted the intersection of caste and class oppression in Indian society.

Urban migration played an important role in the emergence of such movements because cities created spaces where marginalized youth could access education, political ideas, and activist networks. The concentration of migrants in urban neighborhoods also facilitated the formation of collective identities and shared political goals.

Thus, caste-based mobilization in urban contexts illustrates how migration can contribute to the development of new forms of social and political activism aimed at challenging deeply entrenched systems of inequality.

4.3 Transnational Migrants and Advocacy: In recent decades, migration from India has increasingly taken on a transnational dimension. Large numbers of Indian workers migrate to other countries in search of employment, particularly to regions such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Many of these migrants come from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized backgrounds.

Transnational migration has created new forms of social networks that connect migrants across national boundaries. These diaspora networks often provide support systems for migrants, including assistance with employment, housing, and cultural adaptation. At the same time, they also serve as platforms for collective advocacy and political mobilization.

Research by Sarabjit Singh Dhillon (2015) highlights how migrants from lower caste backgrounds have increasingly used diaspora networks to address issues of discrimination and labor exploitation abroad. For example, migrant workers in the Gulf countries—such as United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—often work in construction, domestic service, and other labor-intensive sectors.



These workers sometimes face harsh working conditions, long hours, and limited legal protections under restrictive labor systems. In response, migrant communities have formed advocacy groups, workers' associations, and online networks to raise awareness about labor rights and demand better protections.

Diaspora activism also focuses on broader social issues, including caste discrimination, human rights, and migrant welfare. Through international forums, media campaigns, and collaborations with non-governmental organizations, migrant advocacy groups attempt to influence both host-country policies and policies in India related to migrant protection.

Therefore, transnational migration has expanded the scope of social movements beyond national boundaries. Migrant communities are increasingly engaging in global networks of activism that address labor rights, social justice, and equality.

5. Migration, Identity, and Justice: Migration is not merely an economic phenomenon but also a process deeply connected with questions of identity, dignity, and social justice. When individuals migrate from rural areas to cities or across national borders, they carry with them their social identities such as caste, class, ethnicity, gender, language, and religion. These identities often shape the opportunities available to them and influence how they are treated within labor markets and urban societies.

In the Indian context, migration frequently exposes marginalized communities to both new opportunities and new forms of discrimination. While migration may weaken some traditional social barriers found in rural areas, it does not automatically eliminate structural inequalities. Instead, migrants often experience overlapping forms of marginalization linked to caste, economic class, and social identity.

Scholars and policymakers therefore increasingly examine migration through the lens of social justice, focusing on how migrants negotiate identity, rights, and dignity within unequal social structures. Research by development economists such as Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera highlights the importance of public policies in addressing the vulnerabilities of migrant populations and promoting more inclusive development.

5.1 Intersectional Struggles: The concept of intersectionality is essential for understanding the struggles faced by migrant communities. Intersectionality refers to the way multiple forms of inequality—such as caste discrimination, economic exploitation, gender inequality, and ethnic marginalization—interact and reinforce one another. Migrant workers often occupy positions at the intersection of several of these disadvantages simultaneously.

For instance, a migrant worker belonging to a Dalit or Adivasi community may face discrimination not only because of economic status but also because of caste identity. Similarly,



women migrants may experience gender-based exploitation in addition to economic insecurity and social prejudice. These overlapping forms of inequality create complex challenges that cannot be fully understood through a single analytical framework.

In many Indian metropolitan cities, migrant communities have mobilized around issues such as housing rights, labor protection, and social dignity. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad host large populations of migrant workers employed in construction, domestic service, manufacturing, and informal sector jobs.

Many migrants live in informal settlements or slums where access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, electricity, and healthcare is limited. In response, migrant communities have participated in housing rights movements demanding secure housing, protection from forced evictions, and access to urban infrastructure. These movements often involve alliances between labor unions, civil society organizations, and grassroots community groups.

Anti-discrimination campaigns also play an important role in migrant activism. Such campaigns challenge prejudices and exclusionary practices within workplaces, neighborhoods, and public institutions. Migrant workers have increasingly raised concerns about caste-based discrimination, unequal wages, and social exclusion in urban employment sectors.

These struggles illustrate how migrant activism is not limited to economic demands but also involves broader questions of identity and dignity. By organizing collectively, migrant communities seek recognition as equal citizens entitled to social rights and opportunities. Intersectional activism therefore highlights the interconnected nature of social inequalities and emphasizes the need for inclusive policies that address multiple dimensions of marginalization simultaneously.

5.2 Policy Responses: Government policies and welfare programs play a crucial role in shaping migration patterns and addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by migrants. In India, several policy initiatives have been introduced to reduce rural poverty, improve employment opportunities, and mitigate the pressures that drive migration.

One of the most significant initiatives is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005. This program guarantees rural households the legal right to obtain a minimum number of days of wage employment each year through public works projects such as road construction, water conservation, and rural infrastructure development.

The primary objective of MGNREGA is to strengthen rural livelihoods and reduce economic vulnerability among poor households. By providing employment opportunities



within villages, the program aims to reduce the need for distress migration—migration that occurs primarily because individuals lack viable livelihood options in their home regions.

Research by Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera (2011) suggests that MGNREGA has had several positive impacts on rural communities. The scheme has contributed to increasing rural wages, improving household income security, and strengthening bargaining power for agricultural labourers. In some regions, the availability of local employment opportunities has slowed seasonal migration patterns by enabling workers to earn income without leaving their villages.

However, despite these achievements, several challenges remain. Structural inequalities rooted in caste hierarchies often influence the implementation of welfare programs at the local level. In some cases, marginalized caste groups face difficulties accessing employment opportunities or receiving timely wage payments due to local power dynamics and bureaucratic barriers.

Furthermore, while MGNREGA addresses certain aspects of rural economic insecurity, it does not fully resolve the deeper structural issues that drive migration, such as unequal land distribution, lack of quality education, limited access to skilled employment, and persistent social discrimination. As a result, many rural households continue to rely on migration as a key livelihood strategy.

Effective policy responses therefore require a more comprehensive approach that combines employment programs, social protection measures, labor rights enforcement, and anti-discrimination policies. Ensuring portability of social benefits for migrant workers, expanding access to urban housing and healthcare, and addressing caste-based discrimination in labor markets are important steps toward promoting greater social justice.

Discussion: Intersectional frameworks reveal that caste and class are not separable in understanding how migration fuels social movements. Migrants from marginalized castes experience layered oppression economically and socially which often becomes the impetus for collective organizing.

Conclusion: Migration serves both as a consequence of inequality and as a catalyst for resistance. Social movements rooted in migrant communities have historically contributed to struggles for equality and justice, challenging entrenched systems of caste and class.



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