



Call for papers: International Conference, June 1-4, 2026, Asian and Orient Institute, University of Zurich

Proposal submission email: casteconferencezurich@proton.me

Concept Note: Caste, Social Mobility, and Migration: Interrogating Economic Transformations and Institutional Pathways

The study of caste, one of the world's most enduring systems of social stratification, has long been central to understanding Indian society. Traditional scholarly approaches have effectively documented its ideological foundations, its mechanisms of exclusion, and the resilience of its segregated and hierarchical order. However, contemporary social realities, marked by rapid economic change and unprecedented mobility, demand a more dynamic analytical framework, contrasting processes and opportunities of social mobility in the past. This concept note proposes an international conference to explore the intricate interconnections between caste, social mobility, and migration, arguing for a renewed focus on how economic transformations and institution-building—and also migration—are reshaping or hindering the social mobility for Dalits and “lower” castes including “lower” caste Muslims (pasmada groups) and Dalit Christians among other similar communities. It calls for an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that moves beyond a singular narrative to capture the complex, often contradictory, experiences of caste in motion. In doing so, both upwards and downwards social mobility processes will remain the focus.

Existing scholarly debates on caste and mobility have largely oscillated between two poles. On one hand, the “Sanskritization” model, pioneered by M.N. Srinivas, explained mobility through the emulation of “upper”-caste rituals and practices. While historically significant, this model is critiqued for its limited focus on cultural mimicry and its inability to account for structural and political economic shifts. On the other hand, several scholars have focused conversion away from Hinduism as a way of achieving some social mobility. Of late, scholars have also emphasized the persistent power of capital and class. The rich tradition of caste empowerment and social mobility studies has powerfully centred on assertion, political mobilization, and the struggle for dignity, yet there remains a need to more deeply integrate this with analyses of the economic sphere, particularly in an era of neoliberal globalization.

This conference seeks to bridge these debates by situating processes of social mobility among Dalit, “lower”-caste, and other similar groups in other religions within the twin



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processes of economic transformation and institution-building. Caste and religious institutions of “lower” castes, Dalits and other marginalised sections often founded schools, colleges, hospitals, banks, and charity organisations for social mobility. What role do these organisations and their institutions play towards socio-economic transformations of a particular community? Moreover, economic liberalization in India has not simply erased caste; it has reconfigured it. It has not only created new niches in the urban service economy but also simultaneously entrenched new forms of precarious, caste-segmented labour. At the same time, new avenues for Dalit and “lower” caste social mobility have also been opened through policies like reservations for SC, ST and OBC communities. Keeping all these processes in mind, the central question is: how do “lower” castes and Dalits navigate this transformed socio-economic landscape to attain social mobility? We posit that the role of caste associations, their particular institutions like educational and religious ones and several business initiatives coupled with migration—both internal and international—is a critical, yet under- theorized, lens through which to study this navigation.

Historically, rural-to-urban migration has offered the poor an escape from village constraints and access to anonymity, education, and new economic opportunities. While, rural elites have also moved to cities to consolidate their power and secure their status. Yet, urban spaces often reconstitute caste in subtler forms through residential segregation, network-based hiring, and discrimination in the rental and housing markets. Studying internal migration from this perspective requires examining how caste networks facilitate or hinder movement, how urban labour markets are caste-typed (from sanitation work to IT services), and how the economic gains from migration are converted into social capital and educational advancement for the next generation back home. External migration—to the Gulf countries, North America, Europe, and elsewhere—presents a more complex picture. It offers the potential for a more radical disembedding from the local structures of caste, enabling significant economic remittances that can fund education, business ventures, and political influence back home. The celebrated narrative of the “IT Dalit” working in Silicon Valley symbolizes this potential rupture. However, this must be critically examined. To what extent does emigration lead to social mobility for migrants and their communities in their country of origin? How do remittances fuel local institution-building, such as schools, hostels, or community centres, that are explicitly designed to bolster collective social mobility and what constraints do they continue to face? Furthermore, the experience of “lower” caste migrants must be contrasted with that of “upper” caste migrants to understand how pre-existing social capital shapes diasporic success, challenging the myth of a blank slate.

To adequately capture these multifaceted dynamics, we advocate for non-linear and non-teleological approach, meaning: there are different trajectories of social mobility for different communities, and we want to explore these divergent models and compare them with each other. The experience of caste transformation is not monolithic. It is shaped by region, gender, class position within the caste groups, and their different generations. A young Dalit or “lower” caste woman migrating as a nurse to the Middle East has a vastly different experience from a Dalit or “lower” caste man working on a construction site in



Dubai, or from a second-generation Dalit professional in Canada asserting his identity in a new way. A pluralistic methodology demands interdisciplinary dialogue—combining sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and geography—and a mixed-methods approach that leverages both quantitative surveys to map broad patterns and qualitative ethnography to uncover lived experiences. While doing so, the main aim is to map: How do the distinct mobility trajectories of historically marginalized communities (Dalits, STs, OBCs, Muslims, and others) actively reconfigure the landscape of social hierarchy and spatial segregation in contemporary India? Moreover, we also aim to locate the changing patterns of hierarchy and segregation as a result of social mobility (upward, static or downward). Ultimately, this initiative aims to foster a conversation that moves beyond seeing migration merely as an act of movement, but rather as a profound social process that is actively reworking the boundaries of caste. By focusing on the intersection of economic transformation, institution-building, and migration, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how Dalits and “lower” castes including Muslims, Christians, and other religious groups of marginalised social background are strategically engaging with socio-economic transformations in a changing India and the globalized world. The goal is to generate scholarship that does not just document inequality but illuminates the agentic pathways through which social mobility is pursued, negotiated, and achieved or hindered by class formation, caste reproduction and an elite capture of institutions within caste groups, thereby contributing to a more robust and contemporary theory of social change in caste-based societies.

This conference, to be held from **1-4 June 2026, at the Department of India Studies, Asian and Orient Institute, University of Zurich**, will serve as a collaborative workshop for a planned **edited volume**. We invite contributions that engage deeply with these themes. The last date to submit a 300 word abstract is December 31st, 2025. Please submit your abstract to the following email address: casteconferencezurich@proton.me

Selected participants will be required to submit a **detailed 7000-word paper** one month in advance of the conference to allow for thorough pre-circulation and engaged discussion. The conference itself will be structured to provide extensive feedback on each paper. Following the event, authors will be invited to revise their papers within 3-4 months, incorporating the feedback received, for formal submission to the volume. We are pleased to offer full funding for flight, accommodation, and boarding for all invited participants. We seek a firm commitment from potential contributors to this rigorous and collaborative process, which we believe is essential for producing a cohesive and high-impact academic volume.

Organisers:

Mukesh Kumar

Nicolas Martin

Anurag Panicker