



Universität  
Zürich <sup>UZH</sup>

AOI – Asien Orient Institut

## Caste, Social Mobility, and Migration

Interrogating Economic Transformations  
and Institutional Pathways xz

1st – 3rd of June 2026

Room E-08, Rämistrasse 59



Students queuing to collect scholarships offered by a charitable trust of a Billava industrialist

Organized by  
Nicolas Martin, Mukesh Kumar & Anurag Panicker



**Day One** *Monday, 1 June 2026*

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- 09:00–09:15**      **Welcome & Opening Remarks**  
Nicolas Martin, Mukesh Kumar & Anurag
- 09:15–10:15**      **The Dalit Movement's Template of Upward Mobility and the Persistence of Caste**  
Nicolas Jaoul — *IRIS / EHESS, Paris*  
Chair: *Shrey Kapoor*
- 10:15–11:15**      **Upward 'Social' Mobility, Affective and Narrative Communities & Mitwelt**  
Johannes Quack — *University of Zurich*  
Chair: *Shrey Kapoor*
- 11:15–11:30**      ☕ *Coffee Pause*
- 11:30–12:30**      **Mobility by Caste Personation**  
Joel Lee — *Williams College*  
Chair: *Julien Levesque*
- 12:30–13:30**      **Passing Through Mobility: Experience and the Practice of Social Mobility Among Passing Dalits**  
Sachin Sourabh — *Göttingen University*  
Chair: *Julien Levesque*
- 13:30–15:00**      🍽️ *Lunch*
- 15:00–16:00**      **Institutionalised Dominance: Land, Politics, and the Structural Limits of Dalit Social Mobility in Punjab**  
Nicolas Martin — *University of Zurich*  
Chair: *Sofie Heintz*
- 16:00–17:00**      **Mafia as Mobility? Caste, Illegality, and Upward Social Ascent in the Jharia Coalfield (Jharkhand)**  
Thibault Lukacs — *EHESS, Paris*  
Chair: *Sofie Heintz*

**Conference Dinner · 19:00 · Moudi's Lecker Garten, Winterthurerstrasse 86**

## Day Two *Tuesday, 2 June 2026*

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- 09:00–10:00**      **Possibilities for Inter-generational Social Mobility: South Indian Railway Labourers in British Malaya**  
 Vinita Sinha — *National University of Singapore*  
 Chair: *Genevieve England*
- 10:00–11:00**      **Migration, Caste Networks, and Social Mobility: The Billava Community Between Mumbai and South Canara**  
 Mukesh Kumar — *University of Zurich*  
 Chair: *Genevieve England*
- 11:00–11:15**      ☕ *Coffee*
- 11:15–12:15**      **Capital 'Afloat': Colonial Tourism, Technological Transformation, and Social Mobility Among the Houseboat-Hanjis in Kashmir**  
 Pushpendra Johar — *Independent Researcher*  
 Chair: *Anurag Panicker*
- 12:15–13:15**      **Caste Capital to Mobility Capital: A Conjunctural Approach**  
 Sanam Roohi — *University of Göttingen*  
 Chair: *Anurag Panicker*
- 13:30–15:00**      🍽️ *Lunch*
- 15:00–16:00**      **Caste, Class, and Mobility Patterns in a Karnataka Village**  
 B. Satheesha — *GIPE, Pune*  
 Chair: *Nicolas Martin*
- 16:00–17:00**      **Narayan's People: Tracing Domestic Mobility Amid the Progeny of a Dalit Tanner**  
 Édouard Conte & François Ireton — *Bern / CNRS*  
 Chair: *Nicolas Martin*
- 17:00–18:00**      **Caste, Rural Power, and the Relational Politics of Social Mobility – The Case of the Jat Mahasabha**  
 Shivam Mogha — *Jawaharlal Nehru University*  
 Chair: *Nicolas Martin*



**Conference Dinner · 19:00 · Napulé Seefeld**

## Day Three *Wednesday, 3 June 2026*

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- 09:00–10:00**      **The Limits of Religious Assertion: Everyday Constructions of Ravidassia Identity in Punjab and Diasporas**  
 Annamaria Laudini — *EUI, Florence*  
 Chair: *Nidhin Donald*
- 10:00–11:00**      **'Assertion as Accumulation': Limits of Ravidassia Religious Separation in Punjab**  
 Anurag Panicker — *University of Zurich*  
 Chair: *Nidhin Donald*
- 11:00–11:15**      ☕ *Coffee*
- 11:15–12:15**      **Beyond Sanskritization: Perceived Mobility and Changing Caste Relations in Rural Uttar Pradesh**  
 Floriane Bolazzi — *University of Milan / CESAH*  
 Chair: *Mukesh Kumar*
- 12:15–13:15**      **Guarding the Ladder: Caste, Brahmin Associations, and the Regulation of Socio-economic Mobility in North India**  
 Amisha Gautam — *JNU, New Delhi*  
 Chair: *Mukesh Kumar*
- 13:30–15:00**      🍽️ *Lunch*
- 15:00–16:00**      **Between Symbolic Aspirations, Material Needs, and Constitutional Constraints: Bureaucratic Insights on Muslim Social Mobility in India**  
 Julien Levesque — *CNRS-GSRL*  
 Chair: *Johannes Quack*
- 16:00–17:00**      **To Be Seen by the State: East Indian Catholics, (Im)mobility and the Politics of Affirmative Action in Western India**  
 Nidhin Donald & Asha Singh — *Humboldt University / CSSSC, Calcutta*  
 Chair: *Johannes Quack*
- 17:00–18:30**      ◊ **Concluding Remarks & Roundtable — Synthesis**

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### Conference Notes

Each paper: 60 minutes (20–25 min delivery · 10 min comments · 20–25 min discussion).

Tea & coffee breaks: 15 minutes. Lunch: 1½ hours,

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# Abstracts & Participant Biographies

## The Dalit Movement's Template of Upward Mobility and the Persistence of Caste

**Nicolas Jaoul** · IRIS / EHESS, Paris

### ABSTRACT

Ambedkar elaborated the importance of an enlightened Dalit elite to lead the community intellectually, politically and morally. His vision partly materialized thanks to the quotas, which led to the formation of a Dalit middle class, but without solving the problems of the Dalit poor, as Ambedkar himself regretted. Far from being solved, the tensions between individual upward mobility and collective action remain a fundamental underlying feature of the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement's political sociology. The anti-caste intellectual Anand Teltumbde challenges this discourse of social mobility as a modern myth of the Ambedkarite movement. He calls instead to refocus on class issues as the only effective means to counter caste as a system of exploitation. Whether or not we agree with his Marxist critique of Ambedkarism, there is a need to reevaluate and rethink the manners in which social mobility has (or not) impacted Dalit lives and prospects. In this presentation I will therefore recall how the Dalit movement has conceived social mobility and what can be expected from it, keeping in view the purpose of caste annihilation.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Nicolas Jaoul is a CNRS researcher in Anthropology at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Politique, Paris (EHESS). In 2004 he defended his thesis on the history of Dalit activism in the state of Uttar Pradesh. He has since continued to develop an ethnographic approach of the political subjectivities of the disadvantaged in India, highlighting the regional specificities of the Ambedkarite movement, as well as comparing it with the participation of Dalits in the communist movement, in Hindu nationalism and in Gandhism.*

## Upward 'Social' Mobility, Affective and Narrative Communities & Mitwelt

**Johannes Quack** · University of Zurich

### ABSTRACT

One protagonist of my current book project, Shriram, was born into a poor Chuhra (Balmiki) family in rural Uttar Pradesh. At the age of 18 he migrated to Delhi, where he worked as a rag-picker for many years, before eventually becoming a government employee. However, his 'upward social mobility' came at the expense of many aspects of 'the social'. He managed to 'cultivate' himself in such a way that he became alienated from his own community, including his immediate family — especially his wife. While he remains 'outside but part of' his caste community, he has also become part of 'affective communities' and 'narrative communities' constituted by other middle-class Dalits in Delhi. Although he rarely meets them in person, this paper argues that they are an important source of support for him, because they help him to constitute a livable world (a Mitwelt, in Hannah Arendt's terminology).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Johannes Quack is an Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Zurich. He studied religious studies, social anthropology and philosophy at the universities of Bayreuth, Edinburgh and Heidelberg, receiving his PhD in 2009. His main publications include Disenchanted India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India (OUP, 2012) and several edited volumes on religion, non-religion, and secularity. He is co-director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network and a member of the European Research Council project "Religion and its Others in South Asia and the World".*

## **Mobility by Caste Personation**

**Joel Lee** · *Williams College, Massachusetts*

### **ABSTRACT**

Caste concealment, as a clandestine practice committed by definition to its own invisibility, resists the usual social science methods of documentation, quantification, and analysis. At the same time it is generally acknowledged as something widespread, a kind of public secret. To the extent that Dalit caste concealment has been considered in the historical and sociological literature, the milieu is invariably that of elite, upwardly mobile individuals or families, usually in government service or high prestige professions. But is caste concealment confined to middle class contexts? Does its promise of upward mobility extend to non-elite occupational domains?

This paper considers the life stories of Dalits in the north Indian city of Lucknow who conceal caste in order to obtain work in sectors of the labor market heretofore underexamined in the literature. Following the narratives of domestic workers, devotional musicians (qawwals, bhajan singers), and hardware engineers throws light on ways in which caste structures corners of the labor economy with complex and sometimes unexpected links to varna ideology. The narratives illuminate the degrees and kinds of mobility these sectors permit and how distinct professions invite the adoption of particular caste personae — revealing enduring adaptations of the correlation between caste and occupation.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Joel Lee is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Chair of Asian Studies at Williams College, Massachusetts. His research focuses on caste and its entanglement with religion, labor, environment, secrecy, and the sensorium in South Asia. His first book Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion (Cambridge University Press, 2021) investigates the emergence of the idea that "untouchables" are inherently "Hindu" and the clandestine traditions of Dalit religious autonomy it obscures. He has also co-edited Concealing Caste: Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature (Oxford University Press, 2023).*

## **Passing Through Mobility: Experience and the Practice of Social Mobility Among Passing Dalits**

**Sachin Sourabh** · *Göttingen University*

### **ABSTRACT**

Discussions of social mobility among marginalized communities in South Asia are usually dominated by institutional frameworks—both economic and cultural. My research redirects attention to embodied practices of mobility as seen in the empirical and understood theoretically under the signifier of ‘passing’. My Delhi-based fieldwork examines social

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mobility as a lived practice, exploring how passing Dalits navigate, perform, and pursue aspirations within structures of constraint.

My research participants' lifeworlds are both - temporally tethered to the era of neoliberalisation in India, and marked by spatial reconfiguration through migration. I focus on how Dalits in urban India have remade themselves through neoliberal subjectivity as the discourse of the entrepreneurial self who perpetually self-fashions. This process resonates theoretically and empirically with passing practices, with migration serving as a crucial component of the passing repertoire. For instance, while Mr. Anand runs a private advertising agency and believes that 'in private sector only your work (and not caste) speaks', at the same time, he drives a BMW to work and has an eccentric personality to go along with his identification with a Punjabi Savarna identity. Ms. Rana's family migrated to Delhi from their village in the adjacent state of Haryana and started passing as high caste Jats (landed elites). To maintain the semblance of socio-economic mobility in public, her family takes special measures like inviting only relatives who can 'look and act' like Jats in front of their nosy Jat neighbours. She notes how their above-average 'height and health' (Jat markers) and fluency in the Jat dialect facilitates this 'acquired-natural' identity. Through my paper, I argue that by focusing on 'caste passing' as both an approach to and a practice of social mobility, we can unbraided structural contradictions in institutional understandings of mobility. Alternatively, understanding Dalit efforts to improve life chances thus requires acknowledging how institutional approaches intersect with embodied mobility

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Sachin Sourabh is an Early Career Writing Scholar with MWF Delhi and a PhD candidate at CeMIS, University of Göttingen, specialising in the anthropology of caste, ethics, and passing through a mixed-methods approach that includes participant observation, autoethnography, and narrative biography. He received a scholarship from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung to support his PhD project, and completed his MA and MPhil at the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, working on a critique of affirmative action jurisprudence in India since the 1950s.*

## **Institutionalised Dominance: Land, Politics, and the Structural Limits of Dalit Social Mobility in Punjab**

**Nicolas Martin** · *University of Zurich*

#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the structural causes of the general lack of Dalit social mobility in the Indian Punjab. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Malwa region, it argues that land and politics in rural Punjab constitute a single, self-reinforcing system of privilege — what I call "institutionalised dominance" — from which Dalits have been structurally excluded since the colonial period. Where the social mobility literature typically documents the channels through which mobility occurs, this paper asks a prior question: what are the structures that explain why and where mobility can happen, and why and where it cannot?

It shows that class structures in Punjab are not pre-political facts that precede the state but political creations — constituted by colonial land law, reconfigured by the Green Revolution, and continuously reproduced through ongoing acts of political allocation. Control of politics determines who gets access to land, subsidies, credit, contracts, and state resources; and

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access to these resources generates the social authority and economic leverage needed for political power. In a stagnant agrarian economy, political connections have become the primary vehicle of accumulation, and those who control political institutions use them not only to enrich themselves but to actively block Dalit participation.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Nicolas Martin is Associate Professor of Modern Indian/South Asian Studies at the University of Zurich, where his research focuses on caste, democracy, inequality, agrarian change, and social mobility in South Asia, particularly in Punjab. Trained in anthropology at the London School of Economics, he has led two SNSF-funded projects: "The Reproduction of Caste? Economic, Political, and Kinship Strategies among Jats in Punjab" and "Caste Religion and Social Mobility in India". His latest book, "Democracy Against Equality" examines how state institutions and democracy have contributed to the reproduction of inequality in rural India.*

## Mafia as Mobility? Caste, Illegality, and Upward Social Ascent in the Jharia Coalfield (Jharkhand)

**Thibault Lukacs** · EHESS, Paris

#### ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Jharia coalfield in the district of Dhanbad, Jharkhand, this paper examines the links between caste, organized crime, and upward social mobility. It explores how certain young men from lower or intermediate castes, deprived of stable access to legal employment and institutional channels of social and status advancement, turn to the coal mafia economy in search of alternative routes to upward social mobility.

In a context marked by blocked educational and occupational trajectories, the weakening of the state's promises of integration, and the centrality of patronage networks, politico-criminal organizations appear not only as structures of predation, but also as avenues to income, protection, respectability, and legitimacy. Yet this upward mobility remains sharply constrained: while some men from lower castes can rise within mafia enterprises controlled by higher castes, their promotion is generally limited to the outer circles. The upper reaches of power remain largely inaccessible — the core reserved for the family, the second circle for members of the dominant caste, the Rajputs.

Through an ethnographic account of the rise and fall of a Dalit mafia figure, this paper shows that such trajectories are neither fully liberating nor durably stabilized — spectacular and accelerated, yet fragile, improvised, reversible, and deeply contingent.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Thibault Lukacs holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) and a Master's degree in Social Anthropology. He is currently in the fifth year of his PhD in Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. Since 2018, he has been conducting an ethnographic study of the coal mafia in the state of Jharkhand, northern India. Alongside conventional ethnographic research methods, he also works with documentary filmmaking and visual anthropology.*

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## Possibilities for Inter-generational Social Mobility: South Indian Railway Labourers in British Malaya

**Vinita Sinha** · *National University of Singapore*

### ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic materials, in this paper I detail the possibilities for, and limits to inter-generational social mobility for a segment of South Indian railway labourers (permanent way workers) who maintained railway networks in British Malaya at the turn of the 20th century. Between 1881 and 1940, almost three million immigrants from India arrived on British Malayan shores. An overwhelming majority were South Indian Hindus, while two thirds belonged to the labouring sector and a third were drawn from the lowest rungs of the Indian class and caste hierarchies — that is, from non-Brahmin, Āti Tirāvīṭa communities.

Against the backdrop of railway modernisation and nation-building projects in Malaysia and Singapore, I map the social mobility pathways of 'railway families' over three generations. These former Malayan Railway labourers — designated as menial labour in the colonial period — were 'unintended beneficiaries' who were able to build and accumulate capital and capacity over time through the basic education and technical training that effective railway operations demanded. However, there were clear limits to socio-economic mobility for first and second generation labourers. Subsequent generations fared better, with many leaving behind their caste identities and the railway services.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Vinita Sinha is Professor of Anthropology in the NUS Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Her research focuses on Hindu religiosity in the diaspora, religion–state encounters, religion, commodification and consumption processes, Hinduism's entanglement with materiality and visuality, and the decolonisation of knowledge production. As an ethnographer, her research has focused on how Hindu communities in Singapore and Malaysia negotiate inherited traditions even as they creatively produce novel religious imaginaries.*

## Migration, Caste Networks, and Social Mobility: The Billava Community Between Mumbai and South Canara

**Mukesh Kumar** · *University of Zurich*

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how internal migration to Mumbai enabled caste empowerment for the Billavas, a historically marginalised community from coastal Karnataka. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mumbai and South Canara, archival material from the Billavar Association of Bombay (established 1932), and oral histories spanning three generations of migrants, the paper traces the community's transformation from blue-collar laborers to white collar professionals and business entrepreneurs in hospitality and finance.

Central to this process were institutions such as the Billavar Association, caste-run night schools, and the Bharat Co-operative Bank (founded 1978) in Mumbai, which together facilitated education, employment, financial inclusion, and political representation. The Billava migrant network also channeled remittances into temple construction, caste associations, and educational institutions back home in South Canara. The paper argues that this mobility is the result of a conscious politicisation of caste interests to fight socio-economic inequality by

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producing a stronger caste via a combination of individual and collective aspirations — not without internal contradictions and conflicts.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Dr Mukesh Kumar is a Senior Fellow and Lecturer in the Department of Indian Studies at the University of Zurich, supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). His research examines the intersections of religion, caste, conversion, and social mobility. He received his PhD from the University of Technology Sydney in 2019 and has held the Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellowship at Heidelberg University (2019–21) and an ETH Zürich Postdoctoral Fellowship (2021–23). He is the author of *Between Muslim Pir and Hindu Saint: Laldas and the Devotional Culture in North India* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).*

## **Capital 'Afloat': Colonial Tourism, Technological Transformation, and Social Mobility Among the Houseboat-Hanjis in Kashmir**

**Pushpendra Johar** · *Independent Researcher*

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper traces the consolidation of Houseboat-Hanjis as a distinct caste in Kashmir during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It situates this process at the intersection of British colonial tourism, Dogra monarchical regulations, and material innovation, showing how new trajectories of caste consolidation and class formation emerged among water-dependent communities. Through ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and archival research, the paper examines how dispersed Hanji sub-castes were reconfigured through their participation in an emergent colonial leisure economy and the Dogra state's property regime.

Restrictions on land ownership under the Dogra king Pratap Singh shaped the contours of colonial tourism and drew water-based dwellings into new relationships of market use and value. Departing from explanatory models centered on ritual emulation or religious change, this analysis foregrounds how transnational capital circulation, colonial holiday-making, and princely state governance structured new forms of occupational differentiation. Yet class advancement remained incomplete and contested — community prosperity generated resentment among higher caste Kashmiris, and caste identity became inextricable from the houseboat artifact itself.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Pushpendra Johar is a social anthropologist based in New Delhi. His PhD from the University of Delhi is an ethnographic study of social structure in Kashmir, from the vantage point of the Houseboat-Hanji community. As a researcher at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Edinburgh, his work has extended to welfare systems that fail manual labourers, the politics of digital healthcare in India, and how Indians use WhatsApp in elections, neighbourhoods, and markets. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality*.*

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## Caste Capital to Mobility Capital: A Conjunctural Approach

**Sanam Roohi** · University of Göttingen

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I start from the implicit assumption held by many Indians today — that their prospects of social mobility are stunted in their country and that one key way to climb up the social mobility ladder is to migrate out of the country. But does this assumption hold up to empirical scrutiny? Based on 15 years of ethnographic research with a) a professional class of migrants in the US from among the agrarian castes, and b) largely blue-collared migrant workers in the GCC countries belonging to backward castes, I examine this assumption thoroughly.

Borrowing from Fernand Braudel's framing of time/history and taking the middle level or conjuncture (a period spanning 10–50 years), I explore how ascriptive identities (particularly caste), educational capital, social norms carried forward from the country of origin, and systemic issues in the destination country work in tandem to build mobility capital over time. My research shows that only after more than a decade of steady migration does a more predictable relationship between caste, spatial and social mobility become discernible.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr Sanam Roohi is an anthropology graduate (University of Amsterdam) and currently a researcher at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), University of Göttingen. Her work explores caste–class–higher education intersections, embodied migration infrastructures, and transnational political mobilisation. She has held fellowships from the SSRC, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and Marie Curie COFUND, and is currently working on a book tentatively titled In Pursuit of the American Dream: Techno-Capitalist Morality and the Transnational Reproduction of Caste.*

## Caste, Class, and Mobility Patterns in a Karnataka Village

**B. Satheesha** · GIPE, Pune

### ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the longstanding question of the association between caste, class, and mobility patterns in India by using longitudinal data collected through household survey conducted in Alabujanahalli, an agriculturally prosperous village located in Mandya district of southern Karnataka, in 2009, 2019, and 2022. While caste and class are often assumed to be closely linked in shaping mobility outcomes, they influence peoples' life chances through distinct social and economic mechanisms. In this study we examine such mechanisms to understand how occupational mobility mediates the effects of caste and class origins, focusing on two major caste groups, Scheduled Caste (SC) and the dominant caste Vokkaliga (OBC). The mobility patterns of marginalized castes observed in Alabujanahalli in recent decades differ from existing village studies, highlighting the often neglected role of regional and temporal contexts in social mobility in India.

We observe a considerable occupational mobility among these two castes between 2009 and 2019, with the mobility is much higher for the SCs in comparison to Vokkaligas. The majority of the young workforce from SC community could access regular jobs in non-farm sector. Regional development interventions, infrastructure projects such as dam construction in

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the 1930s and sugar factory, and the resulting connectivity to Bengaluru have created new opportunities and changed the occupational structure of Mandya. In addition, the expansion of education in the late 1960s particularly benefited the marginalized castes, helping them to access better paying jobs. This has, in turn, altered the patterns of mobility and caste-class relationships in the village. However, we also observed that while the regional development has weakened traditional agrarian relations and improved mobility prospects for marginalized sections of the village, the dominant caste has still been able to exert control over labour through state-sponsored employment programs such as MGNREGA, using political lobbying, affecting the employment and wage prospects of unskilled workers in the village.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Satheesha B is a Senior Research Associate at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE), Pune, India. His research centres on labour market changes, agriculture, and rural development in India. He received his PhD from the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi in 2023 and has conducted extensive field surveys in Karnataka to examine the factors influencing rural labour market changes across Indian states over the last few decades.*

## Narayan's People: Tracing Domestic Mobility Amid the Progeny of a Dalit Tanner

**Édouard Conte & François Ireton** · *University of Bern / CNRS, Paris*

#### ABSTRACT

Social mobility studies in India are often conducted either at the national or state level using intergenerational approaches based on large-sample surveys, or through qualitative research concerning small groups encompassing three generational levels. The survey we submit strives to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in addressing issues of mobility. Our corpus includes some one thousand agnatically related individuals and their spouses at four successive generational levels; it groups descendants of a tanner and founder of a patrilineage (gotra) belonging to a Chamar sub-caste (jati) in Madhya Pradesh.

Our research explores the transgenerational paths followed by the collective's constituent lines of descent over four generations, focusing on the intermeshed dimensions of occupational, educational, and migratory mobility. A broad palette of destinies emerges. At one extreme, the waning of the gotra's ascribed occupation (tanning) without the acquisition of new skills correlates with spatial immobility, educational stagnation, and persistent dependence on manual labour. At the third and fourth generations, certain individuals 'break through' to professional status; only when such persons leave their inherited socio-spatial sphere does the stigma of Dalit origin dissolve.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Edouard Conte is Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology at the University of Berne and a former Directeur de recherche at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale in Paris (CNRS-Collège de France). His earlier research conducted in Chad, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine addresses gendered processes of kinship and marriage, notably as they relate to transformations of personal status law. Since 2020, he has participated in a project concerning 'Changing Ownership Patterns and Systems of Relatedness in India' in the framework of SFB 294 'Strukturwandel des Eigentums' at the Max-Weber Kolleg (University of Erfurt); his contribution*

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*concerns the development of dedicated methods to understand in diachronic perspective how kin- and class-based structures of relatedness shape modes of property transmission within an extended Dalit collective in Madhya Pradesh.*

*François Ireton is a retired CNRS researcher and socio-economist who has worked in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and India on transformations of productive and family structures, poverty, rural inequality, and the informal economy. He has co-directed several collective works and is currently engaged in ethnohistorical research on strategies of social mobility among small farmers in France and Dalit tanners in India.*

## **Caste, Rural Power, and the Relational Politics of Social Mobility – The Case of the Jat Mahasabha**

**Shivam Mogha** · *Jawaharlal Nehru University*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper looks into how a caste association mediate the social mobility aspect within contemporary economic and political conditions. By looking at the functioning of the Jat Mahasabha in Western Uttar Pradesh and based on a fieldwork in villages of the district of Muzaffarnagar, I aim to demonstrate how the Jat Mahasabha, a caste association of Jats, is finely embedded in the rural sociality of all other existing local castes, thereby shaping social relations from Intra/inter-caste relations to negotiations with state institutions. Among the interrelationship of caste-communities, understanding the dynamics of the dominant caste in the process of institutional consolidation becomes a pertinent sociological question. The function (utility) and form (profile) of the Jat Mahasabha highlight how economic transformation, institution-building, and caste solidarity converge to reproduce and renegotiate social order in contemporary rural North India. Intra-caste solidarity, maintained through events like monthly Mahapanchayats and symbolic performances, consolidates claims to rural power. The Jat community's dominance and caste solidarity in the rural imaginary, firmly achieved and maintained since the days of the Green Revolution, linking their caste with the occupational role of a 'farmer' by utilising technological and mechanical innovations in agricultural work, is safeguarded by the Jat Mahasabha. Its functioning and role in the social organisation of caste communities are naturalised and ever-present in everyday village disputes and narratives of honour. By looking at this question also through a dominant agrarian caste rather than exclusively marginalised communities, this paper expands the field of caste and social mobility. The paper also looks at how important it is to delineate how dominant caste institutions adapt, consolidate in newer forms (from Khap to caste association), and reconfigure power and alters social mobility process of their caste members.

Further, this paper attempts to understand why dominant caste institutional consolidation is necessary to comprehend the structural conditions within which the mobility of socially marginalised groups (Dalits) occurs. One of the cases of this conditioned social mobility is, community linkage with occupation, such as thinking of Jats as the archetype of the kisan and Dalits as only mazdur. However, through fieldwork, I argue that even if Dalits have land in the village, they are still considered as only 'mazdur with some land' but not 'Kisan'. This leads to the larger question of locating social mobility and its acknowledgement not merely as a psychological aspect but as a relational process. At the political front, there is also an explaining of how the Jat Mahasabha interacts/have contestation with newer forms of

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socio-political formations of Dalit assertion, such as the Bhim Army, in villages of Western Uttar Pradesh.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Shivam Mogha is a PhD scholar at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. His research focuses on caste, class, and agrarian politics in Western Uttar Pradesh, examining how local hierarchies shape agricultural practices, labour relations, and political mobilisation. He was involved in documenting the 2020–21 farmers' protests and co-edited Trolley Times, a newspaper that emerged from the movement. He regularly writes for The Indian Express, The Caravan, The Wire, and other publications.*

## **The Limits of Religious Assertion: Everyday Constructions of Ravidassia Identity in Punjab and Diasporas**

**Annamaria Laudini** · *European University Institute, Florence*

#### **ABSTRACT**

"Ravidassia" refers to the self-ascribed identity of (particularly, though not exclusively, Punjabi) Dalits of the Chamar caste devoted to Guru Ravidass. The term gained prominence following the separation of the Ravidassia religion (dharm) from Sikhism in 2010, declared by leaders of Dera Sachkhand Ballan. Since then, Ravidassias have increased in visibility as well as economic and symbolic power. Ravidassia leaders and activists — echoing the 1920s Ad-dharm movement — construct this identity by portraying Chamars as a distinct ethnic group (qaum) with its own traditions, myths, and symbols separate from Sikhism. However, such narratives are not uniformly shared: closer examination reveals a fragmented and often inconsistent set of self-understandings and practices within the community.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in Punjab, Italy, Germany, and the UK, this article compares scholarly frameworks with lived experiences to highlight internal contradictions. While existing scholarship often celebrates the Ravidassia religion as a key driver of Dalit mobility and caste resistance, this article questions the effectiveness of foregrounding religious and ethnic distinctions, arguing that this strategy risks obscuring the caste and class elements behind Ravidassia assertion.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Annamaria Laudini is a PhD researcher in Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence. Her research examines how caste and gender shape the migratory trajectories and outcomes of Punjabi migrants in Italy, with particular attention to how the immigration context reconfigures power relations and social inequalities. Her work is grounded in theories of intersectionality and transnationalism, based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Italy and India. She holds a Master's in Applied Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam.*

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## 'Assertion to Accumulation': Limits of Ravidassia Religious Separation in Punjab

**Anurag Panicker** · *University of Zurich*

### ABSTRACT

There is a tendency among some progressives to treat all identity-based assertions by oppressed castes as 'resistance', without accounting for the role of political actors who 'represent' the community. The consolidation of a distinct Ravidassia religious identity among a section of the Punjabi Scheduled Castes (SC) offers an interesting case to study the relationship between identity assertion and collective social mobility. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with two Dalit politicians in Jalandhar, the paper argues that the internal mechanism of India's electoral system requires politicians to be relatively wealthier than the majority of citizens. Lack of adequate funding for electoral campaigns concentrates political candidacy among the more affluent members of the caste, producing representatives whose class interests diverge from those of the communities they claim to represent. In many cases this develops incentives for the politicians to accumulate once in power. Through this article I attempt to show that India's electoral system, held to be the harbinger of a more equal society, has played a significant role in hindering social mobility.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Anurag Panicker is a PhD candidate at the Chair of Modern Indian/South Asian Studies, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich. His doctoral research, tentatively titled Caste, Religion, and Social Mobility in Punjab, examines how Dalit caste communities employ religion and religious institutions as strategies for achieving social mobility. He holds an MSc in Economics from Pondicherry University and an MA in Modern Indian Studies from Georg August University Göttingen.*

## Beyond Sanskritization: Perceived Mobility and Changing Caste Relations in Rural Uttar Pradesh

**Floriane Bolazzi** · *University of Milan / CESAH*

### ABSTRACT

Based on 75 interviews conducted in 2018 during six months of fieldwork in Palanpur, a village of western Uttar Pradesh, this chapter explores social mobility as a collectively perceived and narrated reconfiguration of relative social positions between caste groups. From a relational perspective, it focuses on the perceived empowerment of Jatavs (Dalits) and Telis (Muslims) vis-à-vis the declassament of Thakurs, historically the dominant caste in the locality.

Jatavs widely describe themselves as more autonomous and economically better off than in the past, thanks to the diversification of employment beyond agricultural wage labour. The perception of lower-caste social mobility does not reflect the classical model of Sanskritization. Rather than emulating upper-caste norms, Dalit assertion often takes the form of differentiation and contestation: manual work is revalued through a rhetoric of hard work and economic advancement, while upper-caste norms of purity, honour, and gender seclusion are openly questioned. The chapter argues that social mobility in contemporary rural India is best understood as a contested and relational recomposition of hierarchy and collective identity.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Floriane Bolazzi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Milan, affiliated with the Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies (CESAH) in Paris. Trained in economic sociology, her research focuses on social mobility and socio-economic inequalities in contemporary India, with particular attention to the role of jati (sub-caste) in shaping life trajectories and access to resources. Her work combines longitudinal data, large-scale surveys, and ethnographic fieldwork.*

## **Guarding the Ladder: Caste, Brahmin Associations, and the Regulation of Socio-economic Mobility in North India**

**Amisha Gautam** · JNU, New Delhi

### **ABSTRACT**

While scholarship on caste mobility has predominantly foregrounded the advancement and political assertion of Dalits and other marginalized castes, this paper examines the less explored counter-process: how historically dominant Brahmin castes respond to the expanding mobility of “lower”-castes and the perceived erosion of their own caste authority in contemporary India. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025 in Uttar Pradesh, the study analyses the responses of Brahmin caste associations to socio-economic change in the post-Mandal era. Focusing on organizations such as the Akhil Bharatiya Brahman Mahasabha and the Akhil Bharatiya Brahman Ekta Parishad, the paper shows how these associations function as institutional pathways that mediate “upper”-caste anxieties arising from a perceived loss of historical privilege. By reconverting symbolic capital rooted in ritual authority, cultural prestige, and moral status into contemporary political relevance, these associations produce discursive dominance through narratives of “Brahmin plight and pride” that reframe questions of merit, entitlement, and social justice. Crucially, the paper demonstrates that Brahmin associational mobilization has tangible material and socio-political consequences for the mobility of “lower”-caste groups. These associations operate as infrastructures of caste continuity through Brahmin networks that facilitate access to employment and entrepreneurship, regulate marriage, and thereby enforce moral discipline to guard the ladder of caste capital. Participant observation of associational meetings and matrimonial assemblies (mel-milaap sammelans) illustrates how “upper”-caste anxieties are translated into intra-caste marriages, network consolidation, and identity politics that inhibit intergenerational mobility among marginalized groups. By analysing Brahmin associations as sites where perceived loss is converted into political grievance, the paper highlights how Brahmins actively shape divergent trajectories of social mobility, thereby sustaining social hierarchies in contemporary India. The paper asks two interrelated questions. First, how do Brahmins, as the most privileged and upper-mobile caste group, perceive mobility of “lower”-castes as a threat to their own dominance in society? Second, how do these narratives and practices work to constrain the mobility of subordinate caste groups?

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Amisha Gautam is a PhD scholar in Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her doctoral research focuses on Brahmin associations in Uttar Pradesh, with particular attention to caste politics, social mobility, and associational forms of power. She holds a Master's degree in Political Studies from the Centre for Political Studies, JNU, and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi.*

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## Between Symbolic Aspirations, Material Needs, and Constitutional Constraints: Bureaucratic Insights on Muslim Social Mobility in India

Julien Levesque · CNRS-GSRL

### ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on the Indian state's treatment of petitions for inclusion made in the name of Muslim castes. Because Indian Muslims are not eligible to Scheduled Caste status, their access to preferential quotas had to go through another regime of recognition, that of Other Backward Classes. The implementation of the Mandal Commission report in 1990 led to the creation of the National Commission for Backward Classes in 1993, a body responsible for evaluating the eligibility of particular communities for OBC benefits. In order to understand the changes in the Indian state's attitude towards Muslim caste, this presentation analyses the documents, called advices, produced by the NCBC. These documents reveal the rationale used by the commission to grant reservations and how it approaches the interplay of two regimes of recognition, namely caste and religion. The analysis of the NCBC advices also opens a window into the petitioners' motivations and justifications, that is, state governments and castes associations or federations. Overall, the presentation highlights the way Muslim social mobility through preferential quotas operates at the intersection of symbolic aspirations, material needs, and constitutional constraints.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Julien Levesque is a research fellow at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), posted at the GSRL (Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités). His research is located at the intersection of the political socio-anthropology of South Asian Muslim societies and the sociology of religion. His first monograph examined nationalism and identity construction in Pakistan's Sindh province. His ongoing work examines how caste politics among Muslims in North India and Pakistan affect dynamics of community formation and political representation.*

## To Be Seen by the State: East Indian Catholics, (Im)mobility and the Politics of Affirmative Action in Western India

Nidhin Donald & Asha Singh · Humboldt University Berlin / CSSSC, Calcutta

### ABSTRACT

The East Indian Catholic community of Coastal Maharashtra is a 'caste-cluster' predominantly made up of 16th century converts from agricultural, artisanal and fishing communities. Prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they were known either by their individual castes or simply as Portuguese Catholics. With the influx of Goanese Catholics in erstwhile Bombay, the middle-classes within this Marathi-speaking group embraced and institutionalised the term 'East Indian Catholic' to distinguish themselves as British subjects and claim a share in public employment.

The growth of Bombay as an economic node affected the socio-cultural and economic life of the community: on one hand, a section became part of a domestic and later transnational professional-managerial elite; on the other, the lower rungs experienced a combined loss of traditional livelihood and land. One iteration of the resulting nativist turn among East Indian Catholics is their mobilisation to enter the Maharashtra state OBC list in 2006, and some are now mobilising to move from the OBC list to the Scheduled Tribe list. Based on interviews,

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focus group discussions and postcolonial community archives, the paper argues that reconstituting one's group as a caste or tribe is, for these communities, the only way to draw the attention of the state — to be seen by the state, one must participate in the politics of caste.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Nidhin Donald is a sociologist with a focus on the study of popular historiography, family, household and Indian Christians. He is currently an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the Chair of Early Modern and Modern History of Christianity, Faculty of Theology, Humboldt University of Berlin (2025–27), following postdoctoral fellowships at IIT Bombay, the University of Lucerne, and Krea University.*

*Asha Singh is an Assistant Professor in Gender Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC). Previously a Hindi journalist in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, she received her PhD from Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Her research focuses on gender, caste, and migration, and she is the author of *Ek Gudiya Ya Chaar Kitaabein?*, an illustrated children's book published by Pratham Books.*