Social Justice and Education of Weaker Sections in India: Special Reference to the Contributions of Prof. K.S. Chalam

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Abstract: *Education has long been recognised as a critical instrument for social mobility, human development, and the realisation of social justice in India. Yet, historical and structural barriers rooted in the caste system have systematically excluded Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and other marginalised groups—collectively referred to as weaker sections—from quality education and its attendant opportunities. This paper examines the interface between social justice and the education of weaker sections, with special reference to the pioneering work of Professor K.S. Chalam, an emeritus scholar in the economics of education, political economist, former Vice-Chancellor of Dravidian University, and former Member of the Union Public Service Commission. Drawing on Chalam's seminal publications—particularly Education and Weaker Sections (1988), Caste-based Reservations and Human Development in India (2007), and related writings— this paper analyses how public investment, reservation policies, liberalisation, and privatisation have shaped educational outcomes for these groups. It argues that Chalam's interdisciplinary approach, combining the economics of education with political economy and social justice perspectives, remains highly relevant for understanding persistent inequities and formulating inclusive policies.*

Keywords: Social Justice, Education, Weaker Sections, K.S. Chalam

1. INTRODUCTION

Social justice in the Indian context is constitutionally enshrined through Articles 15, 16, 46, and related provisions that mandate special measures for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, SCs, and STs. Education is both a fundamental right (Article 21A) and a key pathway to substantive equality. However, centuries of occupational segregation and exclusion under the caste system have left large sections of the population without access to formal learning. Post-independence policies of reservation in educational institutions and public employment, scholarships, and special schemes sought to correct these historical wrongs.

Despite these interventions, disparities in enrolment, retention, learning outcomes, and access to quality higher and technical education persist. Private schools and professional colleges increasingly serve the privileged, while government institutions attended disproportionately by SC, ST, and OBC students suffer from underfunding and neglect. Professor K.S. Chalam (born 1948), a distinguished scholar of the economics of education and human development, has spent over four decades documenting these patterns, evaluating the impact of affirmative action, and critiquing market-oriented reforms. His work provides a rigorous empirical and theoretical foundation for understanding education as both a place of exclusion and a potential vehicle for social justice.

2. PROF. K.S. CHALAM: SCHOLAR ACTIVIST IN ECONOMICS OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE

Prof. K.S. Chalam is widely regarded as one of India's leading specialists in the economics of education, political economy, and Dravidian studies. He taught Economics at Andhra University for three decades (1974–2005), served as the first Director of the Academic Staff College (a scheme he helped pioneer that later became a national UGC program), and was Vice-Chancellor of Dravidian University. He held the constitutional position of Member (and briefly in-charge Chairman) of the Union Public Service Commission (2005–2011), served on the Planning Board of Madhya Pradesh, and later worked as a Special Rapporteur for the National Human Rights Commission. He is currently the Chairman of the Institute for Economic and Social Justice, Visakhapatnam.

Chalam has authored or edited more than 25 books in English (including about ten focused on education) and

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numerous papers. Key works relevant to this theme include the following.

Education and Weaker Sections (Inter-India Publications, 1988): A pioneering interdisciplinary study examining access, costs, and outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

Caste-based reserves and human development in India (Sage, 2007): a comprehensive assessment of reservation policy using time-series data and human development indicators.

Modernisation and Dalit Education: Ambedkar's Vision (Rawat, 2008).

Economic Reforms and Social Exclusion (Sage, 2011).

His contributions to studies on the impact of liberalisation of education on weaker sections, teacher competencies, and regional disparities (especially North Coastal Andhra/Uttarandhra) are well known. Festschrifts, such as Perspectives on Economic Development and Social Change: Essays in Honour of Professor K.S. Chalam (edited by Chinna Rao Yagati) and Economics of Education and Human Development in India (edited by D. Pullarao) acknowledge his foundational role in linking education, caste, and development.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION

Chalam consistently emphasised that formal education was historically a tool of social exclusion. Under traditional caste hierarchies, knowledge transmission is restricted, and lower castes are denied access. British-era reforms, the Hunter Commission (1882), and early 20th-century movements (including those led by Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar) began opening limited opportunities. Post-independence, constitutional safeguards and reservation policies expanded access. Yet, as Chalam notes, public investment from Independence until the early 1990s disproportionately benefited the upper 15 per cent of the population (primarily Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas), producing scholars and policymakers, while the majority remained educationally deprived.

4. KEY THEMES IN CHALAM'S ANALYSIS

4.1 Education as Human Capital and Social Justice

Chalam treats education as both an investment in human capital (yielding private and social returns) and a public good that is essential for human development and social inclusion. Drawing on Ambedkar's vision, he argues that education must equip Dalits and weaker sections with skills for modern industrial and administrative roles, enabling genuine modernisation and democratic participation rather than mere formal literacy.

4.2 Impact of Caste-Based Reservations

In caste-based reserves and human development in India, Chalam provides empirical evidence that reservations improved human development indicators for target groups, particularly in the southern states. He compares Indian preferential policies favourably with Malaysia's Bumiputra policies and notes positive assessments by the World Bank and UNDP. The book published by Sage evoked a huge response not only in India but also in the USA, Pakistan, and other countries, with reviews and scholars working on its publication at the University of California and in India, including using the book as a document in the Supreme Court legal battle in favour of BC reservations in higher education in 2008. He highlighted implementation gaps, under-representation in quality institutions and technical disciplines, and the limited scale of benefits relative to the size of the SC/ST population. He also proposed refining the policy toward more democratic forms of representation.

4.3 Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Widening Inequities

Chalam is a sharp critic of post-1990s economic liberalisation in education. He argues that privatisation and the shift toward fee-paying private schools and colleges have recreated caste cleavages. Government schools have become "dumping grounds" for SC, ST, OBC, and poor students, while quality technical and professional education remains largely inaccessible due to high opportunity costs and caste prejudices. ASER survey data cited by Chalam illustrate persistent learning gaps: Dalit children lag behind their forward-caste peers in both government and private schools. He views the neglect of government institutions as analogous to the deliberate underperformance of public sector enterprises, facilitating eventual privatisation.

4.4 Quality, Teacher Competencies, and Institutional Culture

Beyond access, Chalam examined teacher training, academic staff development, and measures of teaching effectiveness. He pioneered instruments assessing multiple competencies (including relational skills) and warned that casteist attitudes within institutions undermine academic excellence and student well-being, as tragically illustrated by cases such as Rohith Vemula's.

5. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

However, Chalam's framework remains pertinent. Enrolment at the elementary level approaches universality, yet learning outcomes, the transition to secondary and higher education, and representation in elite institutions and STEM fields continue to reflect caste and class hierarchies. The Right to Education Act, while progressive, has not fully reversed the dual educational system. Privatisation trends and the commercialisation of higher education risk further marginalising weaker sections unless counterbalanced by robust public investment, effective reservation implementation, scholarships, and quality improvement in government institutions. His latest publication on the Economic and Social Justice Report developing ESJI indicators for the first time in India evaluated the 75 years of constitutional promise of justice as a pioneering work. It has already stimulated discussions across the country, particularly among socially and educationally backward groups, SCs, and STs.

The policy directions suggested by Chalam's work include:

Strengthening public education as the primary vehicle for equity.

Ensuring genuine implementation of reservations without dilution.

Addressing learning gaps through better teacher preparation and school infrastructure, especially in areas with high concentrations of weak sections.

Integrating Ambedkarite and Phuleite perspectives into curricula to foster critical consciousness.

Monitoring human development outcomes (not merely enrolment) disaggregated by caste, region, and gender.

6. CONCLUSION

Social justice in education for weaker sections cannot be reduced to formal equality of opportunity; substantive measures that dismantle historical barriers and redistribute educational resources are required. Professor K.S. Chalam's scholarship, grounded in rigorous economic analysis, historical awareness, and a commitment to the emancipatory potential of education, offers both a diagnosis of persistent inequities and a normative vision rooted in constitutional and Ambedkarite ideals. His insistence that education must serve as an instrument of inclusion rather than exclusion continues to challenge policymakers, educators, and civil society. Realising social justice demands sustained public commitment to quality education for the most disadvantaged, informed by the evidence and insights that scholars, such as Chalam, have painstakingly provided over decades. As a political economist, Chalam has published widely on the class nature of development in India, particularly caste crony capitalism, where the socially marginalised are further disempowered with degrees without knowledge pushing them into Gig work.

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