

Best Available Schools Scheme for the SC Students in Telangana: Implementation Concerns and Opportunities

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Education is one of the basic prerequisites for development. Government of Telangana has taken several initiatives to provide quality education to the youth in the State. These interventions include: free education from KG to PG (kindergarten to post-graduation), *Gurukula* schools for each social group, introduction of fine rice in welfare hostels, digital initiatives, increasing the number of residential schools and continuation of Best Available Schools Scheme (BASS). These innovative initiatives are more relevant to the marginalized sections of the society who are deprived of education for centuries together. This policy brief focuses on the innovative BASS.

The Context

There is a wide perceived gap between public and private education systems in terms of quality of education which provides the basis for affirmative action for the economically and socially deprived so that they can access private English medium education. Moreover, considerable educational inequalities exist even among the Scheduled Castes. In terms of the quality of instruction and physical infrastructure, a majority of the government and private schools in rural areas or backward districts of Telangana are not up to the mark. Moreover, establishment of new schools with good standards, exclusively for SC students imposes a huge financial burden on the government, but allocating special budget to educational programs is a better option. In this context, the undivided Andhra Pradesh government acknowledged the need to not only improve education levels among the Scheduled Castes (particularly the most vulnerable sections) but also impart quality education to the SC students to enable them to compete with other students.

In order to realise the above objectives the Government of Andhra Pradesh launched the Best Available Schools Scheme (BASS) in 2008 to cater to the educational needs of Scheduled Caste students. The core objective of the BASS is to provide quality education to SC students by enabling them to take admission in private

residential and non-residential schools of the respective districts, particularly for those hailing from the hinterlands. The scheme was extended to non-residential schools in 2014-15 academic year. Under the scheme the admission of a student in a residential school starts with class 5th while in a non-residential school it starts with class first. The scheme is expected to enable the SC students from most vulnerable sections, i.e. agricultural labourers, joginis, bonded labourers and orphans, to access quality educational institutions on par with the general students. This study goes into the following crucial questions - whether the scheme is effective in reaching the target group; and implementation challenges that need to be addressed; and the perceptions of different stakeholders on the implementation of BASS are also captured by the study.

As of 2018-19 academic year, there are 280 private schools that are identified as “best available schools” (BASs) across the State. Over the years the number of BASs has risen steadily in the state. The number of schools identified under the BASS was 115 in 2016-17 and it increased to 280 schools in 2018-19, indicating nearly a three-fold increase. The districts with relatively higher number of BASs are Hyderabad (22), Warangal Urban (22), and Nalgonda (19); and the districts with low number of BASs include Kumuram Bheem (1), Nirmal (2), and Jagtial (2). With regard to the enrolment of SC students under the Best Available Schools Scheme, 4208 are boys and 2894 are girls of the total 7106 students in 2016-17, followed by 4541 boys and 3108 girls of the total 7653 students in 2017-18 and 4738 are boys and 3345 are girls of the total of 8083 students enrolled in 2018-19. There are variations in the identification of the schools and enrolment of students across the districts. Moreover, the schools under the scheme are concentrated in urban areas. The study also found that the proportion of girls enrolling in the BASs has increased steadily during the period 2016-17 to 2018-19.



Challenges of Implementing the BASS

The process of identification of schools under the BASS is as follows: the Scheduled Castes Development Department (SCDD) issues advertisement calling for applications. Prospective schools with required physical and academic infrastructure submit their applications. Then the SCDD officials at the district level visit the respective schools for physical verification and if they are satisfied with the facilities they recommend such names to the state level committee. And the schools are included under the scheme on the basis of the district level committee's recommendations. However, the study found that there is no uniformity in the identification of the schools across the districts.

The majority of the identified schools are located in relatively developed and urban districts and only a small fraction of schools are located in tribal and backward districts. In fact the spread of private schools is also characterised by the same pattern which indicates the demand for private education coupled with the paying capacity of parents. This could accentuate educational inequalities among the SCs. It is also found that many top grade private schools are not showing interest to participate in the scheme. This is partly due to the fact that the amount reimbursed by the Government to BASSs towards students' fee is lower than the amount charged by the schools from other students.

With respect to the allotment of students under the BASS, the parents can choose the school from among the identified schools within the respective district for the purpose of admission. The study found that some of the BASS schools which are not up to the mark; have insufficient facilities and low grade performance in studies, admitted more students than the prescribed number by obtaining 'special permission' from the government. It appears that these institutions resort to such practices to ensure their economic viability in view of assured admissions and reimbursement of fees by the State government; in the process the goal of serving the marginalised sections seems to have become secondary in importance.

This study also found that there is a lack of awareness among the target groups - SC communities, particularly the poorest and the most vulnerable communities - about the government educational schemes such as the BASS, particularly in rural Telangana. A majority of SC students who have been admitted under the scheme belong to one category, i.e. agricultural labour; other marginalised communities have not been able to access the BASS. Moreover, no student has been admitted from the "reserved" categories, such as children of Jogini women, child and bonded labour and orphan children. Ironically the BASS is meant for these excluded sections; but such children are not

able to access the BASS. The above trends indicate that the reservation system is not implemented in accordance with the norms. With regard to admission processes majority of the students and government officials are in favour of a lottery system, whereas the school managements prefer the option of conducting a common entrance exam particularly for the 5th class students.

Although the schools under the BASS are providing accommodation to students in their respective hostels, the quality of food is not up to the mark in general. About 20-25 students are accommodated in one dormitory. Added to that the students put up with inadequate number of bathrooms and toilets, often without running water. Therefore it is suggested that after the expiry of 2-3 year period, the school managements need to seek an extension for another term. While extending the term of schools the District Level or State Level Committees need to take feedback from the students on the availability and accessibility of facilities in the hostels.

The students are of the opinion that the authorities concerned such as the District SCDD officials need to visit BASS schools once in two months to monitor the facilities available to the students and also collect feedback from them for ensuring accountability of school managements. More to the point, some school managements are charging an additional fee from students on the pretext that the school is extending special services such as IIT coaching, *dhobi* (laundry) service, supply of notebooks and medical services.

The school managements (particularly Christian missionary schools) reported that there have been delays on the part of the Government in releasing scholarship payment to the schools. Almost all school managements in four districts are of the view that the scholarship amount paid by the government (Rs 30,000) is not sufficient, particularly for higher class students. They also reckon that the scholarship amount should not be equal for all classes; it should vary according to class. And the issue of delay in releasing the scholarship amount needs to be addressed. The students who studied in Telugu medium schools prior to joining BASS schools encounter difficulties in learning the subjects of English, Maths, Science and Hindi, particularly during the initial period of joining BASS schools. The managements find it hard to make these students to catch up with other students. Parent-teacher meetings are not conducted regularly.

The above table shows the year-wise performance of the BASS beneficiary students studying in the sample schools; it shows the transition of the students from 5th class to 10th class. The annual performance data of the students was collected from the school authorities. It may be recalled here that the evaluation

of performance from class 5th to class 9th is done internally by the respective school teachers while the class 10th annual exams are evaluated externally by the Board of Secondary Education. The performance of the BASS students is divided into Best, Average and Poor levels by using compound annual growth rate. The beneficiary students performed well in some of the schools with growth rate above 5% and some of them performed

- ◆ More schools need to be included under the BASS. While identifying the BASs priority should be given to the schools located in rural and tribal areas.
- ◆ The Government may fix the minimum and the maximum number of schools to be included under the BASS in each district. The percentage of SC population

Table 1: Performance of BASS beneficiary students in sample schools: Average annual examination marks of the school (from 2012-13 to 2017-18)

S.No.	School Name	No. of Students	Class – 5 th (2012-13)	Class - 6 th (2013-14)	Class - 7 th (2014-15)	Class - 8 th (2015-16)	Class - 9 th (2016-17)	Class - 10 th (2017-18)	Compound Annual Growth Rate
1	Shree Gayathri School	8		475	453	468	453	476	0.05%
2	St. Josephs High School	21		507	485	428	439	431	-3.98%
3	Tetrahedron Model School	5	552	546	532	509	542	569	0.61%
4	St Anthony's High School	21	273	271	278	290	302	449	10.46%
5	SV School	35	421	433	456	465	466	464	1.96%
6	Indur Model High School	36	280	298	313	324	348	465	10.68%
7	Kakatiya High School	13	326	342	380	421	452	474	7.77%
8	Century Hi Profile School	11	472					466	-0.26%
9	ST. Josephs High School	25	472	398	450	424	436	484	0.50%
10	Babymoon High School	38	530	498	439	446	453	480	-1.96%

Source: Primary Survey (School Schedule)

averagely for whom the growth rate is between 1% and 5% and some students performed poorly in some schools with a growth rate that is below 1%.

Despite the slightly mixed outcomes, the performance of some students in every BASS school is better in general than that of others; in fact, some of them are class toppers (when compared to BASS students' annual marks with those of the general students in class 10th). This can be attributed in large measure to the hard work of students, fine-tuning of teaching methods and good rapport and interaction between teachers and students, particularly the special attention paid to BASS students.

Policy Recommendations

- ◆ One of the corrective measures needed to address the educational inequalities among social groups is to open new educational institutions or expand the existing ones. Such interventions need to be considered as long-term investment for promoting education among the marginalised and vulnerable communities. The residential schools managed by the TREIS are a good case in point.

and the availability of private schools in a district need to be factored in. These initiatives would not only reduce educational inequalities between the districts and social groups but also serve the critical purpose of imparting quality education to the vulnerable sections in the hinterlands.

- ◆ The number of seats needs to be increased to 20% from the current 15% in each identified school under the BASS; the number of students (minimum and maximum) to be admitted into each identified school needs to be fixed up front. Because in some schools the number of admissions is higher than the prescribed norm. Also, grading of the schools – such as A, B, C grades, according to teaching quality and infrastructure - may be considered in extending the scheme.
- ◆ The SCDD at the district level can play a greater role in spreading awareness of the program, especially among the vulnerable segments of the SC category; and reservation of seats for different categories needs to be effectively implemented. Otherwise, the scheme will deviate from the policy of reservation and this could defeat the very purpose of launching the BASS in the State.

- ◆ The enrolment under the BASS is reserved for the most vulnerable sections among the SCs-children of agricultural labourers, bonded labour, Joginis and orphans. However, in practice, the children of relatively better-off among the SCs are also admitted under the scheme; this is done on the plea that the children from the specified categories are not available.
- ◆ The present practice of lottery system with regard to admission of children may be continued keeping in view the principle of equal opportunity to all SC students irrespective of their educational and economic background.
- ◆ Government should enhance the BASS scholarship to at least Rs 45,000 to Rs 50,000 per student studying in residential schools and Rs 28,000 to Rs 30,000 per student studying in non-residential schools in accordance with the present market levels so that more private schools would opt for the scheme.
- ◆ Special coaching should be imparted to the BASS beneficiary students who are poor at studies and come from Telugu medium background in order to enable them to catch up with other students.
- ◆ In this context the government can impress upon private schools, starting with large reputed ones, to admit SC students as part of their social responsibility. This would also contribute towards fulfilling the requirements under the Right to Education Act, 2009 in the State.



Indur model school, Nizamabad, a BASS school



BASS beneficiary students of High Profile Century School, Khammam

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