

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SCHOOL EDUCATION - AN EVALUATION STUDY OF BEST AVAILABLE SCHOOLS IN TELANGANA

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ABSTRACT

This evaluation study focuses on the relationship between social inclusion and school education in Telangana, particularly emphasizing the “Best Available Schools” (BAS) scheme. The BAS initiative, aimed at promoting equitable education for students from marginalized communities, seeks to bridge socio-economic disparities by providing access to high-quality schooling. The study critically assesses the impact of this program on social inclusion, particularly for students from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, interviews with stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, and administrators), and secondary data analysis. Key areas of investigation include enrollment rates, retention, academic performance, and students' social integration within these institutions. The study also explores the role of infrastructure, teacher-student interactions, and curriculum design in fostering an inclusive environment. Preliminary findings suggest that while the BAS scheme has contributed positively to educational access, challenges remain in achieving full social inclusion. Issues such as social stigma, limited peer integration, and gaps in infrastructure and resources are noted. Moreover, the quality of education across schools varies, affecting the initiative's overall impact. The study concludes by providing recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the BAS scheme, such as strengthening teacher training on inclusive practices, enhancing support systems for marginalized students, and improving school facilities. By addressing these gaps, Telangana's education system can better fulfill its mandate of promoting social inclusion and equity.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, School Education, Best Available Schools, Telangana, Marginalized Communities, Educational Equity.

Cite this Article: Naresh Sudhaveni (2024) Social Inclusion and School Education - An Evaluation Study of Best Available Schools In Telangana. *International Journal of Education*, 5(2), 72–92.

<https://iaeme.com/Home/issue/IJE?Volume=5&Issue=2>

1. INTRODUCTION

Education can be used as a tool to empower the individual. It is a critical means for the attainment of sustainable growth and development. In this regard, primary education is the essential enabling factor for participation, freedom, and overcoming basic deprivation, while secondary education facilitates economic growth and the establishment of social justice. Secondary education empowers children by preparing them for higher education and work. It provides skills for early employment and the foundation for further education. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society in terms of socio-economically and educationally. They have different histories of social and economic deprivation, and the underlying causes of their educational marginalization are strikingly distinct (Mona Sedwal and Sangeeta Kamat, 2008). The development of marginalized sections has long been a policy concern. The SCs and STs are social groups explicitly recognized by the Constitution of India that are marginalized in the development process (Radhakrishna, Aiswarya et al., 2018). The Constitution of India under Article 46 stipulates that the State will promote with special care the economic and educational interests of the socially marginalized¹ and weaker sections of the people, especially the scheduled castes² and scheduled tribes and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. In this regard, the Government of India enacted Free and Compulsory Education to all children aged 6 to 14 years as the Right to Education (RTE) under the 21A of the Indian Constitution in 2009. It ensures universalization of primary education³ as a fundamental right of children. However, not almost all children enrolled in the school can attend the classes, which results in dropping out. This increased dropout rate may be due to their socio-economic background, including caste, gender, economic conditions, ethnicity, and religion. It is particularly true in the marginalized sections of the society (Mangubhai, 2013). Apart from the above-mentioned, children from the marginalized sections are deprived of the education system due to inadequate facilities and specialized training. Many studies on elementary education found that some exclusionary practices from the school

¹ Marginalization is a universal tendency related to social stratification. According to Ramesh (2009), in marginalization, opportunities and benefits are denied to the individuals living on the "margins" while encouraging opportunities for those who are in the "Centre" of society.

² The term "Scheduled Castes" signifies certain constitutional and legal status conferred upon several castes or communities united by their position as untouchables in the hierarchical caste structure of traditional Hindu society (Jha and Jhingran, 2005).

³ It ensures the universalization of primary education universalization of elementary education denotes universalization of provision, enrolment, retention, participation, and achievement. Nation-building and the education system go hand in hand.

authorities badly influence the education of children from the marginalized group (Musthafa and Rini, 2019).

Venkatanarayana and Sankaran (2013) argued that education is the fundamental right of every child, which indicates that every child must be in school and not at work; however, many children could not realize this fundamental right, resulting in them being deprived of primary education. There are sub-population groups that belong to socially backward groups, namely Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), which were the most deprived sections of the society. Many children belonging to these marginalized communities, mainly SC, were engaged in economic activities by leaving schools. This means they were deprived of the basic right to education (Venkatanarayana, 2005). Another scholar, Ramesh (2013), argues that many school-going children in India are now excluded from the educational system and cannot participate meaningfully in their communities' economic, social, political, and cultural life. It shows that present educational programs might have failed to address the requirements of children who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. Some of the educational programmes might have provided sufficient services that affected the interests of these children, leading to further social inclusion and justice (Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

2. INCENTIVE SCHEMES: ENSURING ACCESS AND EQUITY

Revathi, Pradeep, and Naresh (2020) argued that despite different political parties in power in the past years, primary education has remained a consistent priority of the central and state governments due to active government intervention in the educational field. This has provided the necessary conditions for the governments to achieve and sustain impressive success in the primary education sector. At the central and state levels, governments prioritize improving educational opportunities for the people. In this context, to achieve universalization of elementary education, the Government of India has initiated several programmes such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Mahila Samakhya, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, Model Schools at Block level (Ministry of HRD, 2007). At the same time, the state governments implement various educational programmes. In this context, the Government of Telangana significantly focuses on improving the educational opportunities for the people, particularly marginalized sections. Apart from the existing academic programs and institutions, the Government of Telangana initiated free education from KG to PG and increased the number of residential or Gurukul schools. Also, the state government launched various incentive schemes to attract students from SC and ST communities, including scholarships, hostel facilities, free uniforms, free textbooks, and attendance-based scholarships for girls (Nabanita Deka, 2016). The primary and common objectives of these schemes are to promote equity through the inclusion of disadvantaged groups and weaker sections and to enhance access through the expansion of quality school education (Ministry of HRD, 2007).

Aiswarya et al. (2018) argue that these educational schemes for children belonging to marginalized groups at primary level education boost the upper educational levels among the children, providing residential middle schools, reservations in higher education, and scholarships. The provision of incentive schemes has increased the demand side of primary education as it not only helps in the educational development of the child by reducing the cost of sending a child to school but also builds awareness among parents about the importance of sending their children to school (Srinagesh, 2016). At the same time, many parents are not aware of such schemes.

However, those aware of and using such provisions have benefited significantly from them.

Chalam (2000) highlighted that only 20 of the 59 sub-castes among the SCs were represented in educational institutions in the Andhra Pradesh state. The elite and the articulate Scheduled Castes groups are more likely to benefit from these facilities, however, as the more disadvantaged families live in rural areas and often do not know about such programmes.

Scholars like Mona Sedwal and Sangeeta Kamat (2008) explained that the main reasons for the persistence of educational deprivation of SC children are socioeconomic conditions of the household, inadequate access, inefficient service delivery, parental education, home environment, and school environment. The poor quality of education is another critical reason that leads to lower retention. In the case of STs, Many families do not want to send their children to the ashram schools because of the poor educational quality, lack of infrastructural facilities, and distance of the school from the habitat, which leads to an increased number of dropouts. Poor financial capability of the parents is the reason behind the increased enrolment of children in a government school and leads to the increasing number of dropouts after primary education (Mona Sedwal, 2008).

Tilok (2002) reported that household expenditure on education is sizeable; households from poor socio-economic backgrounds often spend considerable amounts of their income on education. This includes elementary education, which is supposed to be provided free by the government. The supply of quality education has not matched the demand for schooling by SC and ST households. On the contrary, the quality of education and environment in government schools has declined over the years, and not just the rich but also those with middle incomes prefer to send their children to private schools. The shift towards private schools is not restricted to the metropolitan cities but is also apparent in smaller towns in smaller towns. To meet the high demand, various private schools, ranging from elite to budget, have emerged that cater to students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Mona Sedwal and Sangeeta Kamat, 2008).

Harinath and Nagaraju Gundemeda (2021) observed that some parents enrolled their children in private schools because they wanted them to access better educational facilities than a government school. Parents do not have perfect awareness of the educational scheme; in the other case, the educational scheme that is aware to them has minor effectiveness in making any difference that can decrease the burden of sending the child to school because the ratio of benefits from the educational schemes was not satisfactory (Lalitha, 2016). Lack of transportation facilities from home to school creates a big burden when safely sending children to school. Since the majority of the parents of the SC and ST students are working in the unorganized sector due to economic constraints, children are being forced to engage in domestic work (Aiswarya and et al., 2018). Harinath (2020) argues that because of the dearth of suitable government residential schools and hostels, SC students are now required to work in their families' agricultural fields due to their low socioeconomic status.

“In a society ridden by caste hierarchy, it is imperative to understand how caste plays a significant role in determining the accessibility to education, the quality of interaction in the classroom, and the response of the local community and teacher to education. School-community relationships were found to be hostile.

The school-community relationship is reflected in classroom teachings and impacts the teacher-student relationship. Caste discrimination does not directly affect students but has its own ways of operating in the school and community. Caste discrimination results from socioeconomic and cultural dominance by the upper caste over the lower caste people (Temaji and Rani Ratna Prabha, 2017).”

Harinath (2020) argues that educational facilities in schools were found to be inadequate. Unscientific pedagogical practices exist in these schools. Social reality is not being reflected in the school curriculum. Caste discrimination leads to dropouts in SC and ST students. This also negatively affects students’ innovative and analytical thinking in the school. Despite significant increases in literacy and enrolment rates, the overall low average literacy level of the country, especially amongst SC and ST populations, continues to aggravate inequalities in educational capabilities between different groups. The first important aspect of these inequalities is the vast difference between states. In addition to these regional disparities, there are also large educational inequalities between rural and urban areas, between different castes, and between men and women. When these diverse inequalities are combined, we get an idea of the extent to which socially disadvantaged groups, such as SCs and STs, have very low levels of education. Among these groups, women tend to suffer the most (Temaji and Rani Ratna Prabha, 2017).

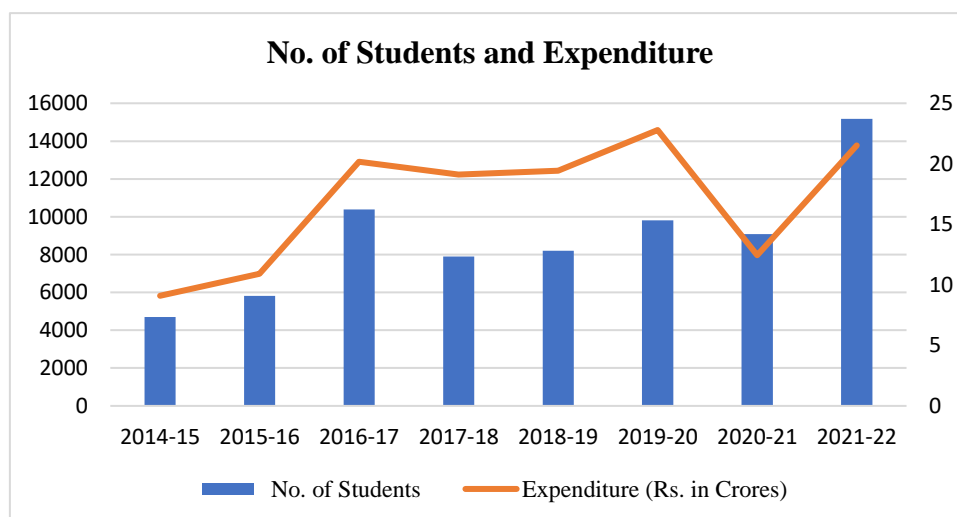
Radhakrishnan, Aiswarya, et al. (2018) argue that, although the link between rising levels of literacy and affirmative action programs may not be direct, these are believed to have contributed to the overall promotion of the importance of basic education (Education Research Unit, 2016). However, the literacy rates of the unprivileged community are still behind the expected level even if the government has implemented various educational schemes for their educational upliftment. There is a need to conduct research in this area to find out the actual cause of the educational backwardness among the SC/ST community despite the availability of educational schemes (Aiswarya Radhakrishnan et al., 2018).

In this regard, the Best Available School Scheme (BASS) assumes importance. The BASS is one such initiative to benefit Scheduled Castes (SC) students. These measures would enable SC students to access the best schools and increase their enrollment. The undivided Andhra Pradesh Government launched the BAS scheme to cater to the educational needs of Scheduled Castes students in 2008. The BASS aims to provide 100 percent quality education to them by enabling them to enroll in reputed private residential schools of their respective districts, particularly in the hinterlands. This scheme enables SC students to access quality educational institutions that are on par with general students.

Table 1: Number of Students and Government Expenditure (year wise)

Sl. No	Year	No. of Students	Expenditure (Rs. in Cr.)
1	2014-15	4700	9.1
2	2015-16	5817	10.91
3	2016-17	10389	20.18
4	2017-18	7899	19.11
5	2018-19	8210	19.42
6	2019-20	9805	22.79
7	2020-21	9084	12.45
8	2021-22	15178	21.52
Total		71082	135.48

Source: SCDD, Government of Telangana, 2022

Figure 1: No. of Students Beneficiaries and Government Expenditure (In Cr.) Year wise

Source: Illustrated from the data

Figure 1 shows that the enrolment of SC students and government expenditure towards the Best Available Schools Scheme has increased yearly. The data represent that the total number of enrolled SC students was 4700 in 2014-15, and 15178 students enrolled in 2021-22. The government expenditure on this scheme was nine crores in 2014-15, whereas it was Rs 21.5 crore in 2021-22, representing that the amount has gradually increased. The study found that the proportion of girls enrolling in the BASs increased steadily during the same period. It indicates that parents give priority to girls' education. However, on the whole, enrolment of the boys was more than the girls during the period 2014-15 to 2021-22 (Table 1).

However, the real concerns of BASS are (i) the availability of physical and academic facilities, (ii) the availability of recruitment and retainment of qualified teachers and education imparted to the students, (iii) the performance of SC students under the BAS scheme. In this regard, the identification/selection of the Best Available Schools and students within the district itself is very significant.

The most crucial concern is whether selected schools under the BAS scheme have all physical and academic facilities and standards in accordance with the government-prescribed norms and are accessible to SC students across the districts. There is a variation in the number of the BASS schools across the districts, particularly between rural and urban areas. There are also variations in the number of students admitted in each district. Thus, the scheme is biased towards urban areas. This may further accentuate the educational disparities within the State. The study has been taken up to look into the issues mentioned above.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Four districts were selected for the study based on the number of residential schools under the BAS scheme. The districts chosen with the number of schools were Karimnagar (6), Nizamabad (5), Sangareddy (5), and Khammam (3). For this study, VIII, IX, and X classes were purposively selected. The number of sample students from class VIII (2), class IX (3), and class X (5) were selected for the study. These students were stratified into groups and selected randomly. In four districts, 19 schools and 56, 64, and 80 students from the 8th, 9th, and 10th classes were selected for the study. Further, the performance of BASS students who passed out of X class in the 2017-18 academic year was examined by collecting their six annual examination marks from their initial admission in 2012-13 (Table 2). The rationale for choosing students from higher classes was that they had considerable exposure to the school environment. This study has been conducted during the 2018-19 academic year.

Table 2: List of Selected Districts, Schools, and Number of Students (Location-wise)

Dis t.	S. No	Name of the School	Locatio n	Number of Students Selected for the Study		
				Boys	Girls	Total
Sangareddy	1	Sr Sai Krishna Talent School	Urban	8	2	10
	2	Keshava Reddy E.M. School	Rural	7	3	10
	3	Shree Gayathri School	Urban	7	3	10
	4	Manjeera High School	Rural	6	4	10
	5	ST. Josephs High School	Urban	5	6	11
Karimnagar	1	Vivekananda Vidhyalayam	Rural	4	6	10
	2	Nandini Convent EM School	Urban	4	6	10
	3	ST Johns EM High School	Urban	0	8	8
	4	Tetrahedron Model School	Urban	6	5	11
	5	ST Anthony's High School	Urban	10	0	10
	6	SV School	Rural	8	8	16
Nizamabad	1	Vignan High School	Urban	8	2	10
	2	Indur Model High School	Rural	6	4	10
	3	ST Paul's High School	Urban	3	7	10
	4	Kakatiya High School	Urban	1	9	10
	5	Ravi High School	Urban	5	5	10
Khammam	1	Century Hi Profile School	Urban	10	0	10
	2	ST. Josephs High School	Urban	0	14	14
	3	Babymoon High School	Urban	7	3	10
Grand Total				105	95	200

Source: Primary Survey

From each school, an average of ten students were selected by using an equal probability random sampling method for the study. The number of student respondents varies from school to school, as students' enrolment in a class and school differs. The selection of students was also subject to the availability of students in that particular class (Table 2). As the study was primarily empirical and participatory in nature, it mostly relied on the primary data collected through structured questionnaires, informal discussions, and focus group discussions. The study elicited the opinions of the students through questionnaires.

The study found a disparity in the number of identified schools under the BAS scheme across the districts in the State. The districts that have more BASs are Hyderabad (22), Warangal Urban (22), Nalgonda (19), Nizamabad (18), Mahabubnagar (17), Nagarkurnool (15), Sangareddy (14), Karimnagar (14). These districts are urban in nature as well as hubs of educational institutions. However, it is essential to note that the BAS scheme aims to provide quality education for low-income families of weaker sections, particularly in rural areas. The districts like Kumrambheem (one), Nirmal (two), Jagital (two), Rajanna Sircilla (three), Janagaon (three), Bhadradi Kothagudem (four), Mahabubabad, Mancherial, Mahabubabad, Yadadri, Medchal (five) have fewer than five BASs in the respective districts (Table 2). The main reasons for poor response from school managements to opt for this scheme are low awareness about the scheme and needing to maintain standards as per the government norms regarding physical and academic infrastructure in the schools.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

4.1. Identification of the Best Available Schools

The government provisions reveal that the school must be reputed with a high percentage of marks, have a residential facility and adequate physical and academic infrastructure, and also have qualified teachers for recognition as the best school in the district. As pointed out earlier, the district-level committee's role is to scrutinize the applications received from the school management. Then, the committee visits the schools for physical verification and inspects whether the school has the infrastructure and whether the pass percentage in the 7th and 10th classes is higher than 90 percent. If they are satisfied with the facilities at the school based on their assessment, they prepare a list of schools and forward it to the state-level committee. It is the competent authority that approves the list. The committee approves such names under the BAS scheme based on the district-level committee recommendations. The approved list of the schools is valid for three years. However, the heads of the schools and the government authorities opined during the informal discussion that,

“While scrutinizing applications from schools, the officials prioritize infrastructure facilities available at schools and 10th class results track record. There is no pressure or interference from political parties or school management associations in the selection of schools. Also, there is not much competition from school managements to include their schools under the BASS. Many top-grade private schools are not showing interest in participating in the scheme.

This is partly because the amount reimbursed by the Government to BASs towards students' fees⁴ is lower than the amount charged by the schools from other students" (Deputy Directors of SCDD and Heads of the Schools). Most identified schools are located in relatively developed and urban districts, and only a tiny fraction are in tribal and backward districts. The spread of private schools is also characterized 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.

4.2. Admission of Students

After receiving the applications from the parents, all district collectors follow a lottery method to select students for admission into class V. The lottery takes place in a manner that is open and transparent. It is done in the presence of people's representatives, SC welfare association members, and parents by the district-level selection committee chaired by the District Collector or his nominee Joint Collector. The committee selects the applicants and gives an option form with details of BASs in the district so they can visit and find the best schools. Then, the parents and students visit the schools and, whichever they feel is the best academic environment, choose the school and ask officials to allot the particular school.

When asked to reveal their opinion on the selection of students, i.e., whether the lottery system or entrance exam is the best method, the majority (63 percent) of students felt that the present lottery system is desirable and suitable for the selection of students. The students opined that the lottery system ensures impartiality and transparency in the admission process. "The Deputy Directors of the SCDD at the district level also agree that the lottery system is justified.

The present practice of the lottery system concerning the 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. Moreover, those who have studied in Telugu medium till 4th class find it difficult to get admission as there is entrance exam is in English" (Deputy Directors of the SCDD at district level). However, the school managements felt that the lottery system does not measure merit, whereas the entrance test enables the management to attract talented students from poor households. "Most of the heads of the school management opposed the idea of the lottery method.

They wanted a standard test for selecting students, particularly 5th-class students. They supported the above statement by arguing that students who studied till 4th class in Telugu medium have no grip on English" (School Management). The admission or allotment of students is not uniform or as per the norms across the districts.

⁴ The amount reimbursed by the government is Rs. 30,000/- per student towards school fee, stationary, lodging and boarding etc. whereas the school management is charging Rs. 50,000/- for only school fee and residential facility. There is a gap about Rs. 20,000/-

The study found that only a few students are allotted to some schools, whereas more students are allotted to others. The headmaster of one of the Best Available Schools in Khammam district said,

“Other schools in the district were allotted more students than his school. In fact, of the 33 districts, 17 districts obtained a special G.O. from the State Government and admitted more students during the 2018-19 academic year. For instance, two of the sample schools, i.e., Swami Vivekananda Concept School in Karimnagar district and Babymoon High School in Khammam district, obtained a special G.O from the Government under which 110 students were admitted in 5th class.”

4.3. Inaccessibility of schools to the targeted groups

The State Government has allocated 15 per cent of seats in each BAS for the educational upliftment of the poorest and most vulnerable communities of SCs. Within allotted seats, 50 per cent of seats are meant for the children of agricultural labourers and children of the first-generation literates. The remaining 50 per cent of seats are filled with orphan children⁵ (20 per cent), children of Joginis⁶ (15 per cent), and children of bounded labor⁷ (15 per cent).

Table 3: Admission of the students under different reservation categories

Class /Gender / Category	8 th Class			9 th Class			10 th Class			Total		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Agriculture Labour	22.4	31.6	26.7	41.2	25	33.5	36.5	43.4	39.8	42.5	38	80.5
Jogini Child	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bonded Labour Child	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Orphan Children	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	40	26.3	33.3	30	21.1	25.6	30	52.6	41	10	9.5	19.5
Total	25.7	30.5	28	39	24.2	32	35.2	45.3	40	52.5	47.5	100

Source: Primary Survey

An examination of the reservation system reveals that an overwhelming per centage of students were admitted under the category of agriculture labor. And none of the beneficiary students are from the categories of Joginis' children or children of bounded labor or orphan children (Table 3). It is important to note that, the BASS is meant for these very excluded sections. The government authorities allotted seats to other

⁵ An *orphan* is someone who has lost both parents.

⁶ The term Jogini is the feminine gender of the word Jogi. A Jogini is also defined as a girl traditionally or superstitiously dedicated to the village gods, but eventually abandoned to the woods - to the caprice and avarice of mere mortals.

⁷ Bonded labor, also known as debt bondage and peonage, happens when people give themselves into slavery as security against a loan or when they inherit a debt from a relative. It can be made to look like an employment agreement but one where the worker starts with a debt to repay.

categories of students under this scheme on the pretext that the children from above mentioned categories are not available. For instance, many orphan children are staying in Social Welfare Hostels (particularly Ananda Nilayam) to continue their studies, but none of the orphan children took admission under the scheme in the sample schools of the study. In case of children of Jogini, no such student enrolled in these schools. This is partly due to low awareness levels about the scheme among the weaker sections of the SC community. Moreover, majority of the students' parents are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Remaining parents were found in the private sector pursuing different activities such as drivers, small business, etc.

4.4.Academic and Physical Infrastructure

The majority of sample schools have physical infrastructure, such as hostel facilities, playgrounds, toilets, and urinals, and academic infrastructure, such as classrooms, libraries, computer labs, and science labs. However, not all schools have adequate infrastructure or quality equipment.

4.5.Participation in sports and games

Play is key to children's physical, mental, intellectual, and social well-being. Students' participation in sports and games significantly impacts almost every developmental aspect of children's lives holistically and in multifaceted ways. All schools have playgrounds and conduct competitions such as volleyball, football, cricket, kabaddi, kho-kho, indoor games, and athletics. Most BASS student beneficiaries (96.5 percent) reported participating in sports competitions in their respective schools. It is pertinent to note that the BASS student beneficiaries participated in the District and State level competitions. During leisure hours, the students were taken out to an open place to play games and sports.

5. Concerns and Opportunities in the Implementation of the BASS

Teacher-cantered Teaching Methods: The teaching methods include class participation, demonstration, recitation, memorization, or a combination of these. In most schools, the teacher-centred learning model is followed in imparting education. In this model, the teacher is considered as a source of knowledge who passes information knowledge to students. Students, on the other hand, can only listen to lectures and get instructions from their teachers. They cannot take active part in the discourse and ask questions as they are passive listeners. The performance of the students is measured based on assessments and tests. But what is required is a 'student-centred teaching method' which would encourage the students to participate in the classroom. This method would enable the students to interact with the teachers and help the students to understand the subjects better, the students opined.

Improve Slow Learners' Performance: One of the challenging tasks of the teacher is how to improve the learning outcomes of slow learners. The teachers motivate slow learners towards studies by promoting reading skills, giving real-life examples. More importantly, they take separate classes after school hours and guide the students on the tests which contributed to improvement in performance. Some of the teachers and hostel wardens also endorsed this view. However, the students are of the view that the pedagogy focuses more on making the students read the subjects repeatedly in the evening classes and less on the teachers' clarification of doubts that is rote learning.

Thus, the slow learners in particular mostly memorize the lessons rather than getting the concepts clarified by the teacher.

Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities: It is important to note that BASS students actively participate in sports and games organized at the school, district, and state levels. Some of the students expressed the opinion that the school managements need to provide more facilities to the students. Also, encourage the students to participate at state and national level competitions on the lines of Social Welfare Residential schools.

Medium of Instruction: English is the medium of instruction in all schools. English is a difficult subject as it is not their mother tongue. Hence, learning English is a difficult task, and learning other subjects with English as the medium of English is increasing the burden on their minds. Some of the students who studied in Telugu medium before joining the BASs opined that they faced difficulties in following the subjects of English, Maths, and Social Science, at least in the initial period of joining the BASs. However, these students also reported that they gradually cope with and familiarise themselves with English medium instruction. Some teachers conveyed the view that many BASS students do not understand the concepts or subject terminology in their real meaning or sense due to the teaching in English medium. Some of the students also endorsed this view and suggested that the teachers be instructed to summarize the lessons taught in the classroom in Telugu medium at the end of a class hour every day.

Retaining Competent Teachers: Recruitment and retainment of teachers who are competent in their subjects and have teaching skills is necessary for effective teaching and improved learning outcomes. Factors such as favourable service conditions and healthy working conditions attract qualified and competent teachers and ensure their retainment by the school. This is the most challenging task for the management of private schools. It is one of the fundamental problems across the schools. Some teachers stated that: “there is no job security and salary is low, hence we feel demotivated to teach. We are continuing in the service as there are limited employment opportunities in the public sector”.

Parents’ Committee Meetings: Most school managements conduct parents committee meetings twice or thrice in a year. Some of the parents of BAS students are members of the committees. The committee members attend the scheduled meetings. The response is better from the parents of students studying under the BASS compared to parents of other students. The parents who are not members of the committee also interact with the school managements and teachers about their children’s performance.

Delay in Releasing Scholarship: Several school managements reported that there is a delay in releasing the scholarship amount. Some of the school managements, particularly Christian missionary schools, reported an inordinate delay on the part of the Government in releasing scholarship payment to the schools. Despite their requests to the SCDD at the District and State levels, the problem remains unresolved.

Perspectives of School Managements on the Implementation of the BASS: The feedback from school managements suggests that they make repeated visits to the SCDD at the time of identifying schools under the BASS, admissions of students, and sanction and release of scholarships to the students.

The school managements have argued that there is a need to revise the scholarship amount every two or three years, keeping in view increasing expenditure in maintaining hostels and salary payment to the teachers. Further, they are providing all the facilities to the BASS students on par with other students. The BAS students' performance has improved gradually compared to their performance in non-BASs, i.e., before taking admission into the BASs. Frequent visits of the SCDD officials to the schools and hostels would give students more confidence and afford them an opportunity to discuss their grievances with the school management and the Government.

“There is no proper or regular monitoring of the schools by the SCDD authorities. There are hardly any higher authorities (deputy director) from SCDD visiting the schools and verifying the facilities both at schools and hostels provided to the students. when the officials visit the schools, they usually meet the principals and do not interact with the students” (Students reported).

Facilities in Hostels: All selected schools have accommodation (rooms in respective hostels). However, there is a variation in the number of students staying per room across the hostels. Some schools have dormitories and 25 to 50 students are accommodated in one dormitory. Bathrooms and toilets are not adequate for all students across the schools. More than one-third (35 per cent) of students reported that bathrooms are not sufficient for all. One-fifth (20 per cent) of students said that toilets and urinals in the hostels are inadequate and causing inconvenience to the students (Table 4). All school managements have RO plants and providing safe drinking water to the students in their respective schools as well as hostels.

Table 4: Perception of student on adequacy facilities at hostel (bathrooms and toilets)

District	Bathrooms		Toilets and Urinals	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sangareddy	58.8	41.2	74.5	25.5
Karimnagar	63.1	36.9	84.6	15.4
Nizamabad	58.0	42.0	70.0	30.0
Khammam	88.2	11.8	94.1	5.9.0
Total	65.0	35.0	80.0	20.0

Source: Primary Survey

Quality of Food: It is common to find hostel inmates complain or even protest against the school managements about the satisfaction on food served in the hostels. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of the students said that they are happy with the food, while the remaining (35 per cent) reported that they are not satisfied with the food (Table 5). The same type of food items are supplied every day (dal and same vegetables every day), and the quality of milk, curd, meat and eggs is not good, sometimes half-cooked food is served to them.

Table 5: Satisfaction of the student on food items (as per the menu)

Class	Yes	No
8 th Class	69.6	30.4
9 th Class	64.1	35.9
10 th Class	62.5	37.5
Total	65.0	35.0

Source: Primary Survey

Hygiene and Sanitation in Hostels: Schools can also be a key factor for initiating change agents to develop valuable life skills on health and hygiene among the children. All children need sanitary and hygienic learning environment, without which there can be a negative impact on students, especially girls. Girls need safe, clean, separate and exclusive sanitation facilities in their hostels which enable them to attend classes regularly. More than one-third of students conveyed that they suffer from minor diseases such as loss of eyesight, skin diseases, and seasonal diseases after joining the hostels. However, most of the students are satisfied with the health and hygienic practices and the health services rendered by the school managements. The wardens take personal care of hostel residents by taking them to a doctor/hospital whenever they fall sick. They also keep first aid boxes with them and treat them for minor illnesses like headache, cold and cough, etc.

Accessibility to Learning Environment

Students' accessibility to the school learning environment, such as library, computer lab, and science lab is essential for advancing their knowledge. For students, library is an indispensable source of knowledge and up-to-date information. Today many educational institutions, particularly private ones, introduce computer knowledge and skills to the students. Effective teaching and learning of science require hands-on experience and experimentation with well-equipped labs.

With respect to the utilization of academic facilities the study reveals that the students, particularly 10th class, have better access to computer lab, science lab, and library than IX and VIII class students. This indicates that the school managements are paying more attention to the higher classes as such special attention is associated with the performance or ranks of the students in the board examination. However, a considerable percentage of students across the schools are not availing facilities of library, computer lab, and science lab (Table 6). During the interactions, students reported some constraints such as inadequate equipment in science labs; most of the schools do not have a dedicated period for practical, some schools rarely open the lab rooms, and managements are not serious about providing adequate equipment and relevant material for experimenting.

Table 6: Per cent of students using academic infrastructural facilities in schools

Class/ Facilities	Library		Computer Lab		Science Lab	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
8th Class	26.7	73.2	58.9	41.1	62.5	37.5
9th Class	25.0	75.0	54.7	45.3	59.4	40.6
10th Class	37.5	62.5	47.5	52.5	47.5	52.5
Total	30.5	79.5	53.0	47.0	55.5	45.5

Source: Primary Survey

The students who reported availing of the facilities were asked to state how often they used them in a month. The responses were captured through three options, i.e., once in a month, less than five times a month, and more than five times a month. The responses vary across the class and facility. The analysis reveals that students who visit the library more than five times a month are among class IX students (50 percent) than class X students (40 percent). However, using the computer lab (79 percent) and the science lab (58 percent) more among the class X than other classes. Thus, the school managements are focusing on class X students by enabling them to have access to computer labs and science labs. These facilities are essential for the students to score better ranks in the board examination (Table 7).

Table 7: Frequency of students accessing academic infrastructural facilities in schools (in a Month)

Frequency/ Facility	Library			Computer Lab			Science Lab		
	8 th Class	9 th Class	10 th Class	8 th Class	9 th Class	10 th Class	8 th Class	9 th Class	10 th Class
Once	20.0	18.8	26.7	3.0	8.6	5.3	20.0	7.9	2.6
Less than 5 times	33.3	31.3	33.3	42.4	25.7	15.8	34.3	39.5	39.5
More than 5 times	46.7	50.0	40.0	54.5	65.7	78.9	45.7	52.6	57.9
Total	24.6	26.2	49.2	31.1	33	35.8	31.5	34.2	34.2

Source: Primary Survey

Attendance and Classroom Activities: The classroom allows students to interact with teachers and clarify doubts in various subjects. It also facilitates two-way learning between teachers and students. This process makes the classroom a platform for social as well as academic interaction. Regular attendance of the students helps them gain knowledge quickly.

Table 8: Difficulty in understanding vocabulary in English

Class	Difficulty in understanding vocabulary		Asking questions/Doubts in Classroom		Answering question in Classroom	
	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
8th Class	37.5	80.4	80.4	19.6	91.1	8.9
9th Class	35.9	92.2	92.2	7.8	90.6	9.4
10th Class	23.8	93.8	93.8	6.3	93.8	6.3
Total	31.5	89.5	89.5	10.5	92.0	8.0

Source: Primary Survey

English Vocabulary: Some of the students face difficulties in understanding the subject concepts and classroom teachings due to their lack of exposure to English, particularly its vocabulary. This is due to Telugu medium background in their previous classes (Table 9). This is the major concern of the parents and teachers that how to uplift these students on par with other students. In this regard, the school managements take extraordinary measures to improve student's vocabulary in English and subjects' knowledge through taking extra classes after school hours. Participation of students in classroom discussions on subject matters and general topics is very low because of the poor English vocabulary of the students. Some students suffer from classroom fear and inferiority complex due to which they do not take part in classroom activities. An overwhelming (92 per cent) of the students across the schools opined that they answer the questions in English, also some times in Telugu raised by teachers (Table 8). However, it is observed in the field study that the boys and girls both equally participate in classroom activities such as rising questions/doubts and answering the questions asked by teachers.

Table 9: Frequency of approaching teachers (in a month)

Class/ Frequency	Less than 5 times	Less than 10 times	More than 10 times	Total
8th Class	14.8	40.7	48.1	27.6
9th Class	21.9	23.4	54.7	32.7
10th Class	15.4	24.4	62.8	39.8
Total	17.3	28.6	56.1	100.0

Source: Primary Survey

Student-Teacher Rapport: The rapport between teachers and students is critical in the education system. Frequent interaction between teachers and students builds strong rapport between them. The study reveals that almost all the students seek guidance from the teachers on the subjects and improve their performance. More than half (56 per cent) of the respondents interact with their teachers ten times or more in a month. More than a quarter (29 per cent) of students approach teachers fewer than ten times in a month.

An insignificant number of students (17 per cent) interact with the teachers less than five times a month across the classes. Students reported that they take advice and help from teachers and seek clarifications on the subjects and personal issues. They also observed that teachers are supportive in this regard (Table 9).

Academic Performance of the BAS Students

One of the indicators for measuring the performance of students is marks obtained in the annual examination. The performance of total sample students in the annual examination is average during 2017-18 academic year. The performance of these students categorized as first, second, and third division based on their previous annual examination marks among three classes. Out of total sample students, a little over quarter of the students (29 per cent) secured 1st division; the more than half (56.5 per cent) of the students secured second division; and only 15 per cent of students secured third division in their respective classes. However, the slow learners are doing better than last year in their studies. The teachers paid special attention to slow learners, such as taking special classes during the study hours in the evening (Table 10).

Table 10: Grade/Division obtained by the students during 2017-18 academic year

Division	8 th Class	9 th Class	10 th Class	Total
1 st Division	25	29.7	30	28.5
2 nd Division	58.9	53.1	57.5	56.5
3 rd Division	16.1	17.2	12.5	15

Source: Primary Survey

The students who secured good marks in the annual examinations opined that their hard work and method of teaching in the classroom helped them get a good score. Other reasons such as suggestions or guidance from their teachers and seniors; doing homework every day, learning the subject in study hours, seeking advice from their teachers on the subject, etc. helped them get good marks in the examinations. The students, across the schools and classes, reported difficulties in one or other subjects. On the whole, English, Maths, Science and Social Studies are difficult subjects. Teacher's guidance and help, self-reading, hard work, and combined studies have helped the students to cope with the learning challenges (Table 11).

Table 11: Percentage of students getting difficulty in understanding subjects

Class/Subjects	English	Telugu	Hindi	Maths	Science	Social
8 th Class	21.9	9.4	18.8	31.3	15.6	3.1
9 th Class	13.9	5.6	25.0	19.4	33.3	2.8
10 th Class	11.8	5.9	20.6	32.4	26.5	2.9
Total	15.7	6.9	21.6	27.5	25.5	2.9

Source: Primary Survey

6. Conclusion and A Way Forward

There is a general lack of awareness among the target-group, i.e., SCs about the BASS. The scheme schools are mostly concentrated in relatively developed and urban districts with fewer schools located in tribal and backward districts; and there is no uniformity in the selection of schools. This could accentuate educational inequalities among SCs. Many private schools, which are more reputed with better results, are not showing interest in applying for the scheme primarily due to the amount reimbursed by the Government to BASs towards a student's scholarship/tuition is less than what they charge to other students in their respective schools. Though the schools are providing accommodation to BASS students in their hostels, the quality of food is not satisfactory. About 20-25 students are accommodated in one dormitory. There are inadequate bathrooms and toilets with running water, which causes a great deal of inconvenience to the students.

After the expiry of 3 years, the school management can seek an extension for another term. While extending the term of the schools, the district level and state level committees need to take feedback from the students on the availability and accessibility of facilities to SC students. There have been delays in releasing the reimbursements to school managements by the Government. The scholarship amount or tuition paid by the Government (Rs 30,000) is not sufficient, particularly for students studying in the residential schools. The students, who studied in Telugu medium before joining the BASs, face learning difficulties in the subjects of English, Maths, Science, and Hindi, particularly in the initial period of joining BAS. The major problem is that they cannot understand the basic concepts or subject terminology and their implications. The students studying under the BAS scheme have performed on par with other students; some of them are in fact class toppers.

- ❖ One of the measures to address the educational inequalities among the social groups is to open new educational institutions or expand the existing schools. These efforts should be considered a long-term investment to promote education in the State, particularly among the marginalized and vulnerable communities.
- ❖ The government should create more awareness among the vulnerable groups among the SC castes and implement seats to different categories properly in its letter and spirit. Otherwise, the scheme would deviate from the norms of equity and preferential treatment for the vulnerable segments of the SC community.
- ❖ More schools need to be identified under the BASS. While identifying the BASs, priority should be given to the schools located in rural areas. The Government may fix the minimum and maximum number of schools to be identified under the BASS in each district. However, the percentage of the SC population and the availability of reputed private schools in a district need to be considered. These measures would reduce educational inequalities between the district and social groups and serve the real purpose of the scheme in imparting quality education to the hinterland's vulnerable sections.
- ❖ The seats in each identified school under the BASS need to be increased to 20 percent from the present 15 percent. Fix the number of students (minimum and maximum number) to be admitted to each selected school.
- ❖ The Government should enhance the BASS scholarship (reimbursement) to Rs 50,000 per student for residential schools and Rs 28,000 per student for non-residential schools to attract more number of reputed schools under this Scheme.

These measures would go a long way in not only reducing educational inequalities between the districts and social groups but also serving the scheme's core purpose, imparting quality education to the hinterland's vulnerable sections.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is an outcome of the project “Implementation of Best Available Schools Scheme for Scheduled Caste Students in Telangana: Issues and Challenges” undertaken by the Division for Studies in Social Inclusion, CESS and supported by the SCDD, Govt. of Telangana. The author acknowledges the support extended by Prof CH Balaramulu and Dr. S. Laxman Rao in the completion of the project.

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Citation: Naresh Sudhaveni (2024) Social Inclusion and School Education - An Evaluation Study of Best Available Schools In Telangana. International Journal of Education, 5(2), 72–92.

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