

## Flood of Promises – Unspent Funds

**Adivasis** and dalits still matter the least when it comes to the provision of even basic facilities like household ownership, electricity, latrines and water connections. Where they do figure prominently are in statistics relating to child mortality, school dropouts and extreme poverty. For instance, the child mortality rate among STs (35.8) is almost double in comparison to all social groups (18.4).

In the run-up to the 2014 general elections, then the Bharatiya Janata Party's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, while addressing a gathering of Dalits and backward classes in Kerala, had described himself as a victim of untouchability. "The next 10 years are going to be yours," he had said.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government ostensibly kept his promise—the 2014-15 budget witnessed a 25% increase in allocation of the two funds meant for Dalits and the adivasis—the Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCSP) and the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) funds. However, more than one-third of the funds allocated by central ministries—Rs 32,979 crore—remained unspent in 2014-15.

This is an increase of 250% in the money unused compared to the previous year. Modi's first year in office as the prime minister saw the 'highest' amount unspent and also the highest percentage of amount unspent in the last three years.

Ever since they were first launched 35 years ago, the two funds have been left mostly untouched by successive govern-ments. Rs 2.8 lakh crore (\$42.6 billion) set aside to improve the lives of scheduled castes and tribes have been lying unused while their intended beneficiaries continue to suffer severe deprivation.

As per guidelines, a part of the budget—proportionate to at least the population of SCs and STs—at both central and state levels is to be set aside for SCs and STs. The current population of SCs and STs in India is 16.6% and 8.6%. So, 16.6% and 8.6% of the Union budget should be allocated to SCSP and TSP, respectively. The same applies to the states too.

Not just that, each ministry, whether state or central, has to keep aside the same percentage of their total funds for SCSP and TSP to carry out individual, family or habitat development works and welfare schemes for SCs and STs.

For instance, the human resource development ministry has to set apart funds under the two strategies for building schools, providing nutritious meals and scholarships and other similar measures for SCs and STs. Similarly, the agriculture ministry has to set aside funds for providing subsidised seeds and fertilisers and crop insurance to SC and ST farmers.

The funds are 'non- lapsable' as per the guidelines issued in 2006 and 2014 by the erstwhile Planning Commission, now NITI Aayog. But low spending has crippled the effort. Records show that no matter which party is in power, SCs and STs rarely benefit from these funds.

The unspent amount—either lapsed or given back to the Centre —is eight times larger than India's agriculture budget, enough to fund India's rural road construction projects for the next 15 years. The unspent Rs 2.8 lakh crore falls under two funds: Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), started in 1974-75, and Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCSP), begun in 1979-80, to channelise funds from general budgets to STs and SCs.

Two years ago, a NCDHR study found that successive governments had denied around Rs 5 lakh crore to Dalits and adivasis by not allocating funds proportionate to their populations. But even the reduced funds that are allocated to the plans are further diluted. For instance, for 2014-15, Telangana's budget for TSP was Rs 4,404.59 crore, but it was revised down to Rs 1,950.29 crore, a decrease of 55.7%.

Though the funds are allocated in the budget, they are released very late in the financial year, leaving states with a very short window to spend them. For instance, in 2014-15, the Karnataka government made budgetary allocation for SCSP and TSP in the state budget in February. But the meeting to release the funds was not chaired by the chief minister until October—a six-month delay. This left the ministry with only five months to spend the entire fund.

During the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rule, the government had diverted its funds to Common wealth Games. Later, it was revealed that the funds were used by the Delhi government to buy Diwali sweets.

In fact, even states such as Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka that have passed legislations for proper implementation of SCSP and TSP, did not make adequate use of funds.

In 2014-15, Telangana, despite a legislation, did not spend 61.26% of the funds allocated for Dalits, and 64.3% allocated for adivasis, which together add up to Rs 7,475.1 crore.

The situation is not very different in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Though the bill was passed, no law has been made on it so that the government escape from its implementation. While Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab top the list for SCSP funds remaining unspent for 2005–14, Jharkhand, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh lead in TSP.

The percentage of unspent funds was 61%, or Rs 4,643 crore, for Telangana in 2014-15. The real unspent amount will be even higher, because data on expenditure are not available for many years with the various governments.

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