

SPACE FOR NEGLECTED CHILDREN IN THE BUDGET

The span of 55 years of our Independence has proved most inadequate for us in providing the bare necessities of food, shelter, clothing, education, health and other such human resource related infrastructure. Rather, the problem has compounded manifolds whereby a large section of our population, of over 65 to 70% continues to manage at below or bare subsistence levels. The government for the people, by the people and of the people has failed to live up to their expectations. The gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' has been widening exponentially, the have-nots numerically increasing in geometrical proportions. In the wake of the much publicized and widely acclaimed globalization, privatization and liberalization, the Government is, obviously, withdrawing from its obligations of the welfare state. The Government is shrinking its stake in the social sector, including the sub-sectors of development pertaining to the most vulnerable among the disadvantaged, the marginalized children.

The development of India's vast human resource potential and its empowerment is essential to create a prosperous economy and just society. Education being the key that may help us realize the dream of a developing nation, specially that of the children who are considered to be supreme assets of our country. But, somehow, the overall scenario in terms of children's education, health and child protection has remained unsatisfactory.

Like the previous years, on the eve of Budget 2003, we seek the attention of the Finance Ministry to social and development sector in general and the children in particular. In a country inhabited by 375 million children (below 18 years), half of them under-nourished - majority being girls, IMR stagnating between 60 to 72 per thousand, literacy being 60% among the 200 million children in the age group of 6 to 14 years, 25 million disabled, 35 million neglected children - 11 million being on the streets, a passing indulgence of the budget formulators would not be out of place. Perhaps, there is an urgent need to look into the entire resources in the government to enhance and optimize their direct service delivery to alleviate the glaring inadequacies that cause irreparable harm to our children.

Reasons need not be given to explain why the children in India do not create a constituency and the voluntary organizations have not been able to successfully lobby for them. Our pious national and international commitments which, appropriately, consider the children as our first call on the society, have mostly remained wishful thinking. The half hearted efforts have dispersed into multiple sectors, departments and ministries with no clear focus on those who need it most, i.e. India's 100 million out of the school who are also deemed to be the 'children in need of care and protection'. Despite we being one of the vocal signatories to UN Convention on the Rights of Child and having at least 10 legislations, 5 national policy papers and 5 national Plans of Action besides the Constitutional commitments touching upon these children, it is still difficult to locate their rightful share in our national resources.

Till date, in real terms and for the purpose of holistic planning, we do not have one nodal set-up. The children upto 5 years are being served by the Department of Women & Child Development, and upto 18 years, mostly from the angle of social defence, delinquency and neglect, by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. The schemes and resources are all scattered creating an urgent need to put them together in the budget focussed upon the children in need of care, protection and development.

Allocation in education, which cuts across different age segments, 0 to 5, 6 to 14 and 15 to 18, in the last budget was partially reasonable, but was less than marginal in the health sector in general and for children's health in particular. There was practically no increase in the crucial sector of 'child protection'. Most of the child related programmes being centrally sponsored schemes with heavy dependence on the external aid and the share of governmental resources has been depleting further. It was observed that only 0.2% of Union Budget, i.e., 20 paise in every Rs. 100 was allocated for the children's health. The budget allocations for each segment of childhood upto 18 years and for each sector, must increase in holistic mould.

A deeper look into the expenditure trends shows that the educational expenses in India had never been more than 3.5% of GDP as against the global average of expenditure on the education at 5.2% and our cherished goal of 6% GDP in India remains a dream unrealized. The share of expenditure from all departments devoted to education declined from around 4.1% in 1990-1991 to 3.8% of GDP in 1998-99. This picture in the States is somehow the same, but there has been an increase in expenditure of the Centre from 0.25% of GDP in 1994-95 to 0.31% in 1995-96 and to 0.36% in 1998-99. The intra-sectoral allocations also show that there was a shift towards elementary education in the 1990s, which was most welcome, but considering the magnitude it needs to further enhance and subjected to appraisal, social audit and turned into a real movement with NGO and mass participation.

Time and again, the much-reiterated 'Education for All' has remained an unfulfilled promise. There was nothing significant and noticeable for children in the much awaited budget of 2002-2003. The total budget estimates stood at Rs.410309.47 crores showing an increase by Rs.45873.07 crores over that of last year. The enhanced allocation of Rs. 900 crores in the plan to the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy taking it to Rs.4900 crore for 2002-2003 from Rs. 4000 crore last years was still grossly inadequate for elementary education when compared to the requirement as articulated by the Government's own report. Hopefully, 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' meant for Universalizing Elementary Education would get an impetus with an increase from earlier allocated budget of Rs. 4.5 crore to Rs.1,400.35 crore. Non-formal education meant for out of school children under the NGOs-led Education Guarantee Scheme & Alternative Innovative Education should remain a part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

The situation in the health sector was even more critical, hardly subscribing to the idea of healthy child in a healthy nation, standing at Rs. 2427.14 crore from the previous year of Rs.2265.51crore. An Analysis of the budget reveals that approximately 0.6% of the total Union Budget was allocated to the health sector in general. Somehow, the sub-sector of children's health, even compared to education, has remained completely out of focus except for the mother and child and neo-natal care. The health care of neglected children, 6 to 18 years, which would cover the most vulnerable street, working and destitute children, has suffered complete lack of attention. Exclusive allocations through central schemes must be made drawn up and run by the NGOs.

The total allocation for child welfare had increased to Rs.1846 crore from last year's allocation of Rs. 1533.89 crore. Nutritional support programmes for primary school children was given a marginal hike of Rs.1, 057 crore compared to the revised estimates of Rs. 1,031 crore. It is difficult to gauge how this marginal hike had helped in implementing the Supreme Courts' directive on providing cooked mid-day meals to all school-going children.

There was very little provision to cover destitute, delinquents, street children, child labour, child prostitutes, etc. during the last budget. The new Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act, 2000, which university raised the age limit of children to 18 years now also covers most categories of the disadvantaged children, necessitates a

major enhancement of budget to provide them shelter, basic care, protection and the opportunities for their development and rehabilitation. It is a common knowledge that the government run or supported institutions, even to fulfill the statutory requirements, have not been set up resulting in lakhs of juveniles and children either languishing in jails or, being exploited and abused all over the country under the law. The Union and State Governments are supposed to partake this responsibility together. This is not happening due to lack of resources since the infrastructure and resources are not in place.

Therefore, it becomes imperative that children's education health and protection, the subject matter of the Department of Women & Child Development or Ministries of Health, Social Justice respectively, must be given topmost national priority, recognition and the due share in the forthcoming Budget. It was interesting to note that there was no separate section in the last budget addressing children's health needs specially, although, there was one for the women.

It can be seen that children of our country in general have been considered voiceless and vote-less without any exception. Those who are socially, physically or economically disadvantaged are even seen as underprivileged. The budget planners and the policymakers need to take up the issues of neglected children with utmost sincerity and accord them their long awaited due space in the concurrent Union Budget for a healthy and prosperous India. Clearly, unless there are requisite resources, which are optimally used, children's issues and basic needs cannot be addressed. This could be met by creating space in the national budget at a time when we think of creating a child friendly India.