

How protected are our children in Assam?

On 4 March 2014, Assam became the first State in India to celebrate Child Protection Day. The idea of celebrating Child Protection Day was the brainchild of Chief Minister Mr Tarun Gogoi and it was successfully put into operation by Assam State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (ASCPCR). Other states in India soon followed the example of Assam in setting aside a day every year to look into the schemes, plans and programmes of the government and its agencies to protect children from all that stunts their growth and development. One of the flagship schemes of Government of India that addressed the concerns of children in need of care and protection was the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). It is appropriate that one assesses the impact of ICPS on a day when we remember the obligation of providing a safe and secure environment to our children.

In 2006, the Government of India, for the first time, officially recognized that its approach to child protection has so far been limited. It has been designed to address largely those children who had already missed the protective net and fallen into difficult circumstances. It also recognized that the coverage fell short of reaching the most vulnerable because the interventions through the existing schemes did not cover all categories of children in difficult circumstances. In order to address these deficiencies and in view of this expanded understanding of child protection and need for better resourcing of this sector, the Ministry of Women and Child Development designed a the comprehensive Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) which was included in the Eleventh Five Year Plan.

Introduced in 2009, ICPS was billed to make significant intervention to protect the vulnerable children from exploitation. It was primarily aimed at tackling child protection violations such child trafficking, child labour, sexual abuse, corporal punishment and crimes against children. It brought together several existing child protection programs under one umbrella with improved norms. It is a centrally sponsored scheme with contributions from both the Centre and the State. Institutional services like shelter homes, observation homes, children homes, Juvenile Justice Board (JJB), Child Welfare Committee (CWC) and many other state-level down to village-level interventions come under ICPS. The main objective of the ICPS is to focus on children in need of care and protection and children in conflict and contact with the law.

It is against this impressive institutional setup of ICPS that one should look at the status of missing children in Assam. According to CID reports presented in November 2015 at least 4,754 children (2,753 girls and 2,001 boys) are missing in the past three years in Assam. A sizeable number of these are forced into prostitution by traffickers who take them to metro cities with the promise of lucrative jobs. According to another report, in Assam, 9,500 children went missing from different places between 2007 and June 2014. Only 3,840 children have been recovered so far. Yet another report mentions that in 2014 around 1,577 children went missing but only 591 have been found. In 2015, till July, of the 984 missing children only 551 were found. The number of children missing is staggering and it is increasing every year.

According to 5th annual report of the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, as much as 4.7% of boys and 1.8% girls below the age of 14 years are into child labour. The same report mentions that out of 568 case of crime committed against children, conviction has happened in only 2 cases! One gets the impression that ICPS and all its subsidiary agencies and ultimately the State and society is failing to protect children.

A look at the Assam State Budget 2015-16 could help us understand the commitment of the Government to the welfare and protection of children. The share of children in Assam

State Budget in 2015-16 is 5.57% which is an increase of 2.11% while compared to 2014-15. It was 3.49 % in 2013-14 and 3.46 % in 2014-15. The increase of financial resources for children in Assam is laudable given the fact that the state budget witnessed a fall by 36 % in 2015-16.

However, the budget estimates for child protection sector in Assam shows a steep fall from 50.21 crore in 2013-14 to 11.79 crores in 2015-16. Within two years, budget estimate for child protection sector has witnessed a sharp fall of 77 %. At a time when child trafficking is on the increase and when crimes against children and crimes committed by children are on the rise, this dip in share for child protection sector is beyond one's comprehension.

If this is the scenario in the state budget, what about the union budget? Against the backdrop of increasing juvenile crime rate, one would have expected the Government of India to increase funds meant to address the concerns of children. Schemes like ICPS which address concerns of children in need of care and protection should have received increased allocation of funds. It is disappointing that even the recently presented Union Budget 2016-17 has reduced the ICPS budget estimate from 402 crore to 397. Compare this with 450 crore allotted in 2014-15. One fails to understand the increasingly reduced share of budget estimate for ICPS in the union budget.

The low allocation of funds is closely related to under-spending of funds allotted for a particular scheme. For example, in 2013-14, JJ Act (State Share) was allocated 1.75 crore but actual spending was just 1.35 crore. There was an under-spending of 0.40 crore (22.9%). If we take protection sector as a whole, in 2013-14, the budget estimate was 50.21 crore but only 10.31 crore was spent. Nearly 79.9% of allocated fund was unused. At the root of low allocation funds in the budget is under-spending. One needs to address the malaise of under-spending. The under-utilization of funds, and thus, failure to implement the schemes results in failing to address the concerns of children. One of the reasons behind under-spending of money is late disbursal of funds, almost at the end of the financial year. Given the short duration of time, the concerned child protection agencies are not able to utilize the money. No wonder that the number of missing children in Assam is keep on increasing every passing year.

Given the track record of low allocation of funds for protection of children and its under-spending, it is important that the Government of Assam through the Department of Social Welfare or through Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights closely monitors the implementation of ICPS and other child related schemes. It is hoped that adequate funds are allocated for ICPS, that the funds are disbursed on time and that they are utilized properly keeping the best interest of children in mind.

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