

NCDHR: Empowering students from India's scheduled castes and tribes

April 2021

The Post Matric Scholarship (PMS) program is India's largest tertiary education scholarship program for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe (SC/ST) students. The PMS program provides financial assistance to students from historically marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities to complete their tertiary education. However, many students are unable to access the scholarship due to opaque application guidelines and timelines. Students who have managed to enroll encounter delays in the transfer of their scholarship funds as a result of the program's chronic underfunding and poor implementation.

With our support, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) reformed its strategy and built up a cadre of student leaders with the budget and political advocacy skills to advocate on their own behalf and unlock reforms. As a result, the NCDHR supported 4,802 PMS applications in three states and worked with the government to simplify the process so more students could apply. In Andhra Pradesh, the government ordered the release of US\$870 million in arrears for the 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years and US\$90 million for FY2021-22, which will benefit 900,000 students. When the program came under threat of being cut, the NCDHR and a broad alliance of civil society partners convinced the government to not only maintain the program but also commit to an increased budget allocation of US\$4.8 billion.

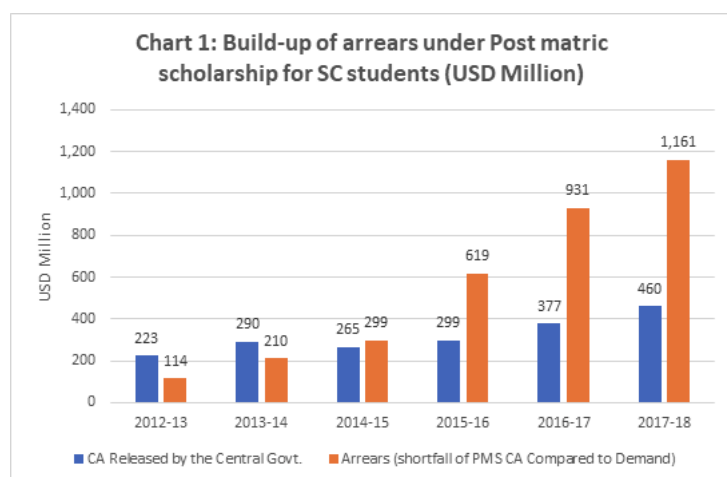
Background

Dalits and Adivasis constitute one-quarter of India's population and make up 14.4% and 5.2% of the student population, respectively.¹ However, the number of Dalit and Adivasi students drops substantially when they move from secondary and higher-secondary education to tertiary education (see Table 1). In recognizing the need to retain SC/ST students at the tertiary level, the Indian government introduced the PMS program for SC/ST students in 1944. Between 2014 and 2017, an average of 5.6 million students benefited from the program each year.

	All categories	Scheduled castes	Scheduled tribes
Secondary	80.0	85.3	74.5
Higher Secondary	56.2	56.8	43.1
Higher Education	24.5	19.9	14.2

Source: Educational statistics at a glance, 2018, Govt. of India. Data are of the year 2015-16.

Since the beginning, however, the program has been fraught with systemic and fiscal challenges. According to a Parliamentary Standing Committee for Social Justice and Empowerment, the PMS program is “inconsistent, uneven and disjointed”.² The committee stated that the PMS program was opaque in its operations, unaccountable, and under-resourced, which resulted in a variety of implementation challenges such as ineffective delivery of services to recipients, delays in funding flows from the Ministry of Finance to students’ bank accounts, and outstanding arrears. The Department of Social Justice and Empowerment noted that the funds allocated each year were substantially less than the amount requested, resulting in extensive arrears (see Chart 1). For example, the department submitted its request for US\$1487 million to the Ministry of Finance but only received US\$1045 million for 2018-19. Due to the accumulation of arrears year-on-year, thousands of eligible scholarship recipients have been excluded from the program or faced delays in receiving their scholarship funds.



Source: Departmentally Related standing Committee Report on DDGs of DSJE 2017-18, 2021-22 and the Union Budget Document

The NCDHR was founded in 1998 by human rights activists, academics, and Dalit action groups involved in advancing the rights of India’s scheduled castes and tribes (Dalits and Adivasis). The organization works as a network in 14 states, representing more than 300 million members. It focuses on combatting deep-rooted caste and patriarchal structures in India that have resulted in inter-generational poverty and systemic deprivation in Dalit and Adivasi communities, particularly for women. For decades, the NCDHR prioritized SC/ST higher education as a key step towards addressing structural inequalities and discrimination but had limited success in PMS reform.

Through its partnership with IBP, the NCDHR has pushed for the PMS program to be redesigned based on feedback from the recipients themselves. They chose three focus states: Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh. These states were chosen because they have large populations of SC/ST communities, NCDHR already had strong networks there, and they provide geographical diversity across India.

The NCDHR's path to results

Joining of technical skills and political power

Dalit and Adivasi communities represent a significant constituency and potential voting bloc for any national government, so in theory they should have political power. At the state level, however, it is more complex. Entrenched discrimination coupled with fragmentation within political parties makes it hard for the community to influence state governments.

The NCDHR has an impressive track record of training Dalit activists and community leaders across India, particularly in understanding budgets and public programs. It has achieved important policy and budget wins, such as the national government's implementation of budget code 789 in 2010 to categorize funds for SC/ST communities to avoid funds being diverted to non-SC/ST activities. Despite policy reforms, however, change for communities on the ground has been slow.

Creating a student-led movement

Early diagnostics carried out by IBP in partnership with the NCDHR revealed the need to strengthen the secretariat's connection to its members and to build ownership among members to carry out the work in their own communities. This required a shift in strategy by the NCDHR secretariat, which was used to acting on behalf of members. We supported the NCDHR and its student networks to co-create a campaign to raise awareness among students about the political and budgetary context around the PMS program and equip them to lead their own advocacy to improve public service provision.



Student youth camp in Jharkhand

The NCDHR began with a student survey to understand the challenges students faced. It selected a core group of 193 student leaders across the three focus states, of which 51% were women. In the first half of 2020, these leaders organized 149 student meetings across three states with 3,149 students. From there, student leaders hosted 46 student camps

with valuable support from tertiary institutions and government officials such as district welfare officers. In the camps, student leaders helped students and college officials to submit and process 2,850 online PMS applications.



Students participating in social media training

The NCDHR's next step was to build the student leaders' knowledge of the PMS application process and bottlenecks. The students were also supported to conduct union and state-level budget analysis. In the second half of 2020, 19 training sessions were held to build the students' political advocacy skills.

Armed with vital new skills, student leaders began developing good working relationships with college administrations, which had at times been strained. In Uttar Pradesh, district welfare officers conducted workshops across several districts to train college administrators and authorities to process PMS applications more efficiently.

Student leaders also used their new-found skills to file more than 125 Right to Information applications under the 2005 Right to Information Act to gather information on the status of student PMS applications and PMS fund disbursements. They also submitted tens of memorandums to colleges, district ministers, and magistrates to highlight issues in the PMS program.

Multi-level engagement with government

“This is the first time I’ve participated in a training that taught us how to understand budgets. It was very interesting, as I had only heard of these big words but wasn’t able to understand them and how to use them. Now I am able to link the budget of the state and central government to my scholarship and why it’s important to stress on that budget so that I and others like me can get scholarships to continue studying.”

Abhishek, 12th grade student, Jharkhand

As with all SPARK projects, the campaign intentionally forged relationships with decision-makers and influential organizations across all tiers of government to bring about sustainable reform. These engagements were formal and informal.

Student leaders in the three focus states engaged with the following state actors involved in PMS implementation: District Welfare Officer, District Collector, Department of Social Welfare, District Magistrate, Sub-District Magistrate, and State Coordinator Legislative Assembly Committee. Pro-reform actors were also identified and cultivated, such as

the Andhra Pradesh District Welfare Officer and Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE).

These informal engagements led to an early campaign achievement. In Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, the deadline for the online application process was extended by almost two months, allowing more students to apply. This decision bolstered student leaders' confidence that they could impact change and motivated more SC/ST students to apply.

“Every time there is a problem with the scholarship applications or distribution, it’s only the college authorities who come to meet me. But this is the first time that the Dalit students came to meet me on their own. I felt very touched. I knew of the work done by the NCDHR and DAAA, but this is the first time I saw these girls and boys coming to talk about the problems they face. I could understand how difficult it was for them, they all came from very marginalized families. I immediately took notice and have tried to help them in whatever way possible. They were facing problems in getting cast certificates and other such documents needed for the applications; it was fixed immediately.”

Kaushal Kumar Ashok, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Jalaun District, Andhra Pradesh

Furthermore, NCDHR state coordinators and other civil society organizations and civil liberties organizations (CSOs/CLOs) initiated pre-budget consultations with members of political parties prior to the 2020 state budget release. These consultations served to ensure that the PMS program was adequately provided for in the proposed budgets.

At the national level, the NCDHR facilitated engagements between SC/ST students and the national ministries responsible for implementing the PMS program, as well as members of parliament such as those in the Public Accounts Committee.³ For the first time, the NCDHR and MSJE jointly organized a national consultation in February 2020. Almost 10 national-level experts and representatives attended the consultation, and after several meetings a draft accountability framework was developed for the PMS program to strengthen day-to-day service delivery.

At the start of the pandemic, the NCDHR state team in Jharkhand became a formal member of the influential NITI Aayog, the Government of India’s think tank that is chaired by the Prime Minister and includes all state Chief Ministers. Leveraging the Aayog’s influence, the NCDHR team held 40 virtual and physical meetings with community social organizations across India over a six-month period in which it raised PMS-related issues and demanded resolutions.

Working through coalitions

While the focus was always on bringing independence and agency to the students, their progress would not have been possible without a strong support network. To date, 113 CSOs/CLOs across the three focus states have helped to strengthen the reach of the campaign and engage with students and other like-minded individuals and networks.

To strengthen these networks, the NCDHR trained CSOs/CLOs to understand the PMS application guidelines and how to engage with the relevant officials at the state and district level. They delved into the process of PMS online applications and discussed the challenges students face in accessing higher education, particularly scholarships. In Andhra Pradesh, where funds have not been released for two academic years, CSOs/CLOs met to discuss unprocessed PMS tuition and hostel fees for Dalit and Adivasi students.

Engagement with the media



#SavePMS campaign press conference

Working with the media was critical to NCDHR's advocacy. For instance, the NCDHR's pre-budget consultation with political leaders received widespread coverage from local media outlets. The positive media coverage raised public awareness and support for the NCDHR's proposals for improving the PMS program.

When rumors circulated in November 2020 that the PMS program may be on the chopping block, the NCDHR launched the #SavePMS campaign and convinced the government to maintain the program and commit to an increased budget. The #SavePMS campaign reached almost 1 million users on social media, reinforcing in the minds of the public the importance of the PMS program and the need for reform.

Covid-19 pivot

There is no doubt that Covid-19 stalled the campaign's progress. Working with the country's most marginalized meant that the NCDHR had to pivot to focus on humanitarian work for the first four months of the crisis. A core group of 40 students was selected by the NCDHR to continue campaigning for PMS improvements, while other activities were temporarily put on hold to focus on pandemic relief.



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Kaushal Kumar Ashok, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Jalaun District, Andhra Pradesh

Students conducted a survey to assist SC/ST communities receive relief packages from the government. The NCDHR developed an App called “WeClaim” to survey and locate communities that had not received government relief packages. Student volunteers spearheaded the relief monitoring, disseminated information about the relief packages, and set up a helpline to assist SC/ST communities. They facilitated application process for relief assistance alongside timely release of scholarships and in doing so emerged as leaders in their communities. New alliances were also forged in the states.

The NCDHR’s main successes to date

As a result of consistent advocacy efforts, the government of India took steps to improve the management of the PMS system. The MSJE established guidelines to strengthen day-to-day service delivery in the programs it funds by instituting a series of monitoring tools and oversight practices, such as strengthening grievance redress mechanisms for students; regular inspections of institutions; training of college heads on scholarship application processes; designated officials to register complaints; and an online portal to provide information on scholarship disbursements. The Welfare Department in the state of Andhra Pradesh also initiated a toll-free number (1902) to enable students to file complaints about the provision of basic services in boarding and college facilities, such as washrooms, libraries, and dining spaces.

The NCDHR also secured important wins to address underfunding of the PMS program and expand allocations. The #SavePMS campaign pressured the national government to allocate US\$4.8 billion for 40 million SC/ST students over five years starting in 2021. The Andhra Pradesh government released approximately US\$600 million in outstanding funds for the 2019/20 academic year; US\$270 million for the 2018/19 academic year; and US\$90 million for FY2021-22, which will benefit 900,000 students.

Thanks to the NCDHR’s advocacy and training, more students have submitted their PMS applications: 4,802 applications were filed across the three focus states, of which 1,557 (32%) were successful. However, Covid-19 has delayed the processing of some applications and disbursement of funds. The states of Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh also significantly extended the PMS application deadline.

Conclusion

With IBP's support, the NCDHR brought about significant change in a short period of time by empowering students. SC/ST students now have agency, are better able to access the application system for the PMS program, and can expect arrears to be paid. Moreover, when the program itself was threatened, the community banded together and lobbied the government to maintain the program, improve it, and commit further funds.

Students who once had limited knowledge of the Indian political context nor the skills to lead budget advocacy are now leading the change and engaging with decision-makers. This has positively impacted the Dalit community as a whole. Dalit students who previously lacked the confidence to bring their concerns to college authorities now believe in their power to enact change and access education. These passionate changemakers are using education to uplift themselves and their communities.