

India: Budget Tracking to Give Dalits a Fair Share of Development

In India Dalits were historically often seen to have low social status because they fall outside the four recognized castes. Because of this, Dalits were treated as “untouchables,” forced to do low status work, and were not permitted to own land or attend school.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 prohibited discrimination against Dalits. However, Dalits continued to be disadvantaged, including in terms of poverty and illiteracy. To help address the situation, in 1980 the Government of India introduced the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP). The SCSP said that at least 16 percent of government development spending must directly target Dalits because Dalits make up 16 percent of the population.

In 1995 the government introduced the code 789 to categorize SCSP funds in budget documents. However, many national and state governments did not use this code.

In 1998 a group of Dalit activists, intellectuals and writers established the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). In 2006 the NCDHR started working with another civil society organization, the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, to develop a methodology to analyze and track code 789 expenditure.

NCDHR filed a court case against the government on the basis that the government had not allocated the required 16 percent. However, NCDHR was forced to withdraw this case because the government had not used budget code 789 consistently and there was therefore insufficient information to back the court claim.

NCDHR then used the Right to Information Act to ask the Delhi state government why it was not using the 789 code. It also disseminated its research to Members of Parliament, the Auditor General, the Planning Commission, and other relevant institutions. It organized workshops around the country to train activists to do similar budget analysis in their own regions. It also organized a demonstration called "The Bounced [Check] Rally" to protest against the failure of the government to deliver the necessary funds for Dalit communities.

In 2008, before the Right to Information request had been finalized, the Delhi government instructed all its departments to use code 789. This was the first big budget victory.

In 2010 the Commonwealth Games were held in New Delhi. There were many allegations of high-level corruption in connection with the Games. The Housing and Land Rights Network, which worked to expose the corruption, found a document that suggested that SCSP funds had been used to help pay for the event. The Network passed on this information to NCDHR.

NCDHR used its knowledge of budgets to confirm that the SCSP funds had been used to pay for the Commonwealth Games. After it publicized the findings, Parliament discussed the issue for two days. During the debate in Parliament, the Minister of Home Affairs admitted that government money was being unfairly diverted from one of the most deprived social groups.

Subsequently, the government made it compulsory for all departments to use code 789 in the 2011/12 budget, and the Planning Commission set up a taskforce in June 2010 to revise the guidelines for the SCSP. This was a further budget victory for Dalits.