

India: Union Budget 2022 : an Utter Failure in Responding to Needs of the Disabled

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The National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) has issued a statement calling the Union Budget 2022 an “Utter Failure” in responding to needs of the disabled. The statement pointed out that the government has refused to heed the demand for free and universal health coverage for all disabled; removing the income criteria in the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana for persons with disabilities.

NPRD pointed out that despite escalating prices and disability related costs, the Central government refuses to enhance disability pension, which has remained at a constant Rs. 300/- for the past decade and more. There has been no announcement of any relief measures in the Budget to tide over the pandemic situation and job loss.

The National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) has issued the following statement:

Utter Failure in Responding to Needs of Disabled

The President’s address to the joint sitting of both houses of parliament on January 31, 2022 had rekindled some hopes in the disabled community. The President of India in his address underlined that “accessibility, equality and a dignified life” for disabled people “is our collective responsibility as a society”. Such hopes, they found rudely, were completely belied the very next day, when the budget for 2022-23 was placed.

Unlike last time, which saw a nearly 12 per cent reduction in allocations to the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, this time there has been a marginal increase. However, even then, there is a shortfall of Rs. 112.97 crores as compared to the 2020-21 budget estimates. This is so even in the case of the total allocated for the national programmes for the welfare of persons with disabilities, which has seen a shortfall of Rs. 20 crores as compared to 2020-21 estimates. Same also with the National Trust as well as the social security and welfare of persons with disabilities, which too have estimates less than what was allocated in 2020-21.

Even the allocation to the Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO) has been drastically from Rs. 50 crore last year to a mere Rs. 0.10 crore this time. ALIMCO manufactures and supplies aids and appliances that the government distributes through various schemes and programmes. Under the auspices of the PM himself, various record-setting mega distribution camps have been organized.

Notwithstanding the adverse experience of the pandemic, the government has refused to heed the demand for free and universal health coverage for all disabled; removing the income criteria in the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana for persons with disabilities as also a substantial increase in allocations made towards mental health programmes.

It has also failed miserably in giving any sort of assurance to the huge army of the unemployed disabled. The privatization of public sector units and the heavy loss of jobs during the pandemic warranted that allocations to the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation be increased considerably, to enable it to provide loans to small businesses set up by disabled people. In the last budget, this was drastically reduced from Rs. 41 crores provisioned in the 2019-20 budget to a mere Rs. 0.01 crore. This time too the figure remains the same.

On top of it, despite escalating prices and disability related costs, the Centre refuses to enhance disability pension, which has remained at a constant Rs. 300/- for the past decade and more. There has been no announcement of any relief to tide over the pandemic situation and job loss. Even the ex-gratia of Rs. 1000/- announced in 2020, according to the Economic Survey 2022, covered only 2.82 crore beneficiaries. Apart from the disabled, the beneficiaries include widows and senior citizens also.

The announcement made to amend 80DD of the Income Tax Act to allow for maturity of an insurance policy even while the parent/guardian of the disabled ward is alive, is welcome. But this has come three years after the Supreme Court gave directions to the Centre on the issue. However, there is no assurance on providing life and other insurance, including for coverage for assistive devices and rehabilitation needs of the disabled.

The goals of “accessibility, equality and a dignified life” that President Kovind, so eloquently espoused, stand shattered.

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