



Right to Food Campaign (Secretariat)

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Maternity Entitlements were legal rights 3 years ago, not a New Year gift

(Statement of the Right to Food Campaign)

On New Year's Eve, the Prime Minister in his much-anticipated speech amongst other commitments announced maternity entitlements for all pregnant women.

But this is old wine in a new bottle. Clause 4B of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 already promises all pregnant and lactating women maternity entitlements of atleast Rs 6000 for each child. But for three years, the central government didn't honour this legal obligation. Though better late than never, re-packaging this legal right as the PM's New Year gift is disingenuous.

For three years, in complete violation of the Act, this government continued with the pilot Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) in just 53 districts of the country despite repeated demands by civil society activists and women from across the country. This year, Right to Food Campaign activists from across India even sent postcards to the PM to remind him of the state's obligation.

In September 2015, even the Supreme Court issued notices to the Centre on the non-implementation of maternity entitlements under the NFSA.

While the government did initially enhance the IGMSY allocations from Rs 4000 to Rs. 6000 to be in tune with the NFSA, neither the coverage nor the budget was enhanced which languishes at Rs. 400 crores. Instead to ensure that all eligible women are covered as per the NFSA, Rs 16,000 crores is necessary. A real test of the Prime Minister's announcement will be in the fine print of the allocations in next month's budget.

New or Old: Also many concerns remains on the cryptic wording of the PM's speech. At this juncture, it is uncertain whether these central allocations would be new monies in addition to existing commitments. The central government already offers rural woman Rs 1400 to conduct deliveries in hospitals under the Janani Suraksha Yojana. Tamil Nadu already gives double - Rs 12000 per child - from its own coffers paid to women directly in their bank accounts.

Conditional or Unconditional: Also unsettling is the hint at conditionalities. Currently, institutional deliveries are necessary for the JSY and immunisation along with a number of other services to get IGMSY instalments. Further eligibility criteria include age limits or limitation of first two children, which needlessly exclude the most vulnerable and marginalized women with the greatest need.

Maternity entitlements must be seen as a right for all women and also as wage compensation for those in the unorganised sector. More than 90 per cent of women in India are engaged in informal employment or in unpaid work and are denied any childcare provisions. A number of labour laws include crèche provisions exist only on paper, but are not implemented adequately with satisfactory quality standards.

The campaign demands universal, unconditional maternity entitlements to be paid with retrospective effect from 2013.

Beyond Maternity Entitlements

The PM's post-50 day speech was also short on new assurances. The right to food campaign has been dismayed by the impact of the Indian government's reckless "demonetization", as a major attack on the right to food and the right to life especially of poor people.

Further, more than 100 people have died in demonetisation-related queues or committed suicide. But in the entire speech there was not a single word of apology, let alone compensation for bereaved families.

Universal Pensions: The weakest on the demonetisation queue frontlines have been the sick and the elderly. But only one of every five old people in India receives a pension. For the last decade the central government's share has been a measly Rs 200 per month under the National Social Assistance Programme. The campaign had long demanded the universalization of social security pensions and to increase them atleast ten fold.

Instead all the PM has offered 100 million senior citizens is a fixed interest rate of 8 percent on deposits for the next decade. But this can at best only benefit those in the middle class who have savings in the first place. Those on the impoverished margins have been left, as always, high and dry.

Anti-corruption: The much-awaited speech also left out more than it said. There has been no serious commitment to make transparent the finances of political parties. Instead, the Lokpal and Whistleblower's laws continue to languish. The Grievance Redressal Bill has lapsed and political parties continue to go scot-free.

India ranks 97 of 118 countries on the Global Hunger Index. The poor need social safety nets, now more than ever.

The Right to Food Campaign demands:

1. Universal, unconditional maternity entitlements (Rs 6,000 per child) as guaranteed in the National Food Security Act with retrospective effect from 2013
2. Ten-fold increase in the centre's contribution to social security pensions for widows, the elderly and disabled persons (under the National Social Assistance Programme) from Rs 200 per month
3. Central assistance for the inclusion of milk, eggs and fruits in school mid-day meals and ICDS
4. Increase in the annual NREGA budget to Rs 60,000 crores, with effect from 2016-7
5. Compensation for all families of victims of demonetization-related deaths and comprehensive anti-corruption measures including political parties
6. Reversal of all recent reductions in social spending by the central government, as a share of GDP
7. Full disclosure of how, when, why and by whom the decision was made to demonetize

Steering Committee of the Right to Food Campaign:

National Networks: KavitaSrivastava and DipaSinha (Conveners – Steering Committee), Annie Raja, (National Federation for Indian Women), Colin Gonsalves , (Human Right Law Network), Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and Anjali Bhardwaj, (National Campaign for People's Right to Information), Madhuresh, ArundhatiDhuru and UlkaMahajan (National Alliance of People's Movements), Asha Mishra and KashinathChatterjee (Bharat GyanVigyanSamiti), Ashok Bharti (National Conference of Dalit Organizations), AnuradhaTalwar, GautamModi and MadhuriKrishnaswamy (New Trade Union Initiative), BinayakSen (People's Union for Civil Liberties), SubhashBhatnagar (National Campaign Committee for Unorganized Sector workers), Paul Divakar and AshaKowtal (National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights), Mira Shiva, RadhaHolla and Vandana Prasad (Jan SwasthyaAbhiyan), Ranjeet Kumar Verma, Prahlad Ray, Praveen Kumar, AnandMalakar (RashtriyaViklangManch), LaliDhakar, Sarawasti Singh, ShilpaDey and RadhaRaghwal (National Forum for Single Women's Rights), G V Ramanjaneyulu, KavitaKuruganthi (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture), Jashodhara (National Alliance for Maternal Health and Human Rights), Ilango (National Fishworkers Federation), Zasia, Sonam, and Noor Jehan (Bhartiya Muslim MahilaAndolan)

State Representatives: M Kodandram, Rama Melkape, VeenaShatrughana (Andhra Pradesh), Gangabhai and Samir Garg (Chhattisgarh), Abhay Kumar (Karnataka), Suresh Sawant, MuktaSrivastava (Maharashtra), Balram and James Herenj, Gurjeet Singh, Dheeraj (Jharkhand), Ashok Khandelwal, Shyam and Vijay Lakshmi (Rajasthan), Sachin Jain (Madhya Pradesh), Joseph Patelia, SejalDand, Neeta

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