

Govt makes a meal

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NEW DELHI: Here is another reason for malnutrition amongst children of economically weaker sections of Delhi — the government is unable to provide cooked meals to these children at least half the time. A Delhi government report reveals that funds under the Supplementary Nutrition for children head also remain unutilised.

Delhi government has to provide supplementary nutrition to children, pregnant women and nursing mothers through cooked meals supplied through a network of anganwari centres. Under this Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, the government has to provide cooked meals for 300 days in a year.

There are 28 ICDS centres in Delhi. The report says that the number of days beneficiaries have been deprived of supplementary nutrition varies from project to project. In 2005-06, the beneficiaries did not get meals for 150 days on an average.

This is not all. The government has been unable to utilise the funds under this head. The social welfare department had to identify and cover 4,67,000 beneficiaries in 2005-06. However, it was able to cover only 4,00,954 children and women. Due to falling short of this physical target and some delays in awarding contracts for cooked meals, even the funds have remained unutilised. In 2005-06 financial year alone, Rs 8,80,38,188 of 14.37 crore remained unspent under this head, which translates to over 61% of the funds lying unutilised.

For the entire Tenth Five Year Plan 2002-07, the government had ear-marked Rs 73.30 crore for providing supplementary nutrition under ICDS scheme. Till 2005-06 fiscal year, the government had been able to spend only 36.16% over four years.

Seeing this under utilisation of funds, an NGO Pratidhi had complained to Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) to inquire into awarding of contracts. The organisation's complaint has now been referred to CBI, which is investigating into alleged bungling into contracts. Raaj Mangal Prasad of Pratidhi said: "The government is unable to cover targeted beneficiaries and spend the allocated funds because it does not award contracts for cooked meals on time. The government does not float tenders and complete formalities in time. This is why malnutrition is increasing."

ICDS scheme was conceived by the Centre in 1975 with an integrated delivery package of early childhood services. The scheme aims to improve the nutritional and health status of vulnerable groups including pre-school children, pregnant women and nursing mothers by providing a package. This includes supplementary nutrition, pre-school education, immunisation, health check-up, referral services and health education.

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