

# 7 CRORE PEOPLE IN TRIBAL AREAS TO BE SCREENED FOR SICKLE CELL DISEASE BY 2025-26: FM

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Sickle cell anaemia is an inherited disease, meaning it runs from generation to generation. File image for representation. | Photo Credit: G. Ramakrishna

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday announced the National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission — with targeted screening and intervention in tribal populations — set to be anchored by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and run by the Health Ministry under the aegis of the National Health Mission (NHM).

[Announcing the mission during her Budget Speech](#) on Wednesday, Ms. Sitharaman said, “A Mission to eliminate sickle cell anaemia by 2047 will be launched. It will entail awareness creation, universal screening of seven crore people in the age group of 0-40 years in affected tribal areas, and counselling through collaborative efforts of Central Ministries and State governments.”

While neither the Tribal Affairs Ministry nor the Health Ministry have shown separate allocations for the mission, officials have said that the programme had been subsumed under the NHM, from where funds will be allocated for this exercise.

The screening exercise kicked off last year (2022-23) and aimed to cover one crore people for that year. Beginning 2023-24, the mission aims to cover two crore people each year till 2025-26. The NHM has estimated a cost of 542.5 crore for the entire screening exercise. It is not clear if the aforementioned budget estimate framed by the NHM has yet been approved to be used for the mission.

Sickle cell anaemia is an inherited disease, meaning it runs from generation to generation. People who have the disease inherit two faulty genes — haemoglobin S, one from each parent; a person who has sickle cell trait inherits only one faulty gene. People with traits are generally healthy.

Haemoglobin S changes flexible red blood cells into rigid sickle shaped cells, which can block blood flow and lead to pain and organ damage.

There are approximately 15 lakh sickle cell-affected patients in the country, according to NHM estimates.

According to a screening exercise conducted by the Tribal Affairs Ministry, out of over 1.13 crore people screened in different States, 8.75% tested positive. Annually, out of three lakh children born with SCD worldwide, 50,000 are in India. 20% tribal children with SCD would die before reaching two years of age and 30% would die by 25 years. Approximately 50% would die by 40 years, and average life expectancy is 30 years below normal.

A senior official of the Tribal Affairs Ministry said that the programme will be anchored and coordinated by their Ministry and that some of the interventions after the screening exercise would be to enable the setting up of prenatal diagnosis facilities in over 18 States wherever gaps were being identified, in collaboration with Indian Council of Medical Research laboratories.

Further, the Union government is providing for the setting up of two Centres for Excellence (advanced) in each of these States to set up diagnosis and treatment facilities, the official said.

Reacting to the announcement of the mission, Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda said that this programme will allow the government to reach tribal people in the remotest of areas in India and engage with them over the disease and the appropriate interventions for it. Thanking Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ms. Sitharaman, Mr. Munda said, "This is not a scheme, it is an effort to build an emotional attachment."

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