



BPNI BULLETIN

Number 27, June 2005

From the Desk of the National Coordinator

The IMS Act saved, happy ending of a successful campaign

In Jan 2005 the Indian government proposed repealing the country's 1992 Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act (The IMS Act) through a new legislation "Food Safety and Standards Bill 2005". The result might have been a weakening of a national ban on the commercial promotion of products that compete with breastfeeding. The BPNI organized a campaign-'Save the IMS Act'-to fight the suggested repeal. So successful were these efforts that the Indian government had to dismiss the subject of a repeal of the IMS Act three months later.

The first step in the 'Save the IMS Act' campaign occurred in January 2005, when BPNI drew a strategy that included plans to approach the public, the media, political parties, government departments, key individuals, citizens' rights groups, professional bodies, economists, and NGOs working on public health, women's and children's issues. A briefing paper was developed with key inputs from Chander Uday Singh, and comments from several friends. Close associates like Raj Anand were always there on phone to refine strategies. JP Dadhich, Jagdish Sobti and Tarsem Jindal provided not only guidance to lead the campaign but were physically there and did all the legwork over these three months. Many organizations that pledged help included: ACASH, IACR, JSA, VHAI, IMA, IAP, FOGSI, TNAI and others. We contacted Dr Vina Majumdar, a respected leader in Women's movement and now working with the Center for Women Development Studies (CWDS). Her personal involvement and guidance was crucial in getting several other organizations to back the campaign. We alerted the global community working on breastfeeding-including IBFAN and WABA, which offered full backing.

The subject of the repeal was discussed with the Dept of Women and Child Development (the sponsoring Ministry for the original IMS Act). The DWCD Secretary wrote a strong letter to the government advising against repeal of the IMS Act. We met the Minister of Human Resource Development, and briefed him. The Minister, too, wrote to the government, arguing against repeal of the IMS Act. The campaigners also pressed the government department responsible for initiating the planned repeal. The department promised to look into the matter. Unsatisfied by the response, we stepped up our efforts. We went to Dr Syeda Hameed, Member Health, Planning Commission of India and she readily agreed to assist. The BPNI communicated with the National Commission for Women and the National Advisory Council as well. Both assured their cooperation.

UNICEF provided a major support in generating Ministerial level response through their letter and meetings with Sh. Arjun Singh, the HRD Minister. Representations were made to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which immediately took up the case and asked the Minister of Food Processing not to repeal the IMS Act. After receiving a lukewarm response from the government, the NHRC issued a press release to raise the profile of the issue nationally.

On the media front, BPNI briefed Rahul Dev, a senior journalist with a keen interest in social issues. He was able to propagate the issue with much-needed assistance through his media and political links. The media, in fact, provided unprecedented encouragement, and carried several stories that helped to bring focus to the issues. We met both the ruling and opposition political parties and they all assured help.

After the campaign had been running for about a month, a meeting entitled 'Coming together to save the IMS Act' was jointly called in February 2005 by the BPNI, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA), the Indian Alliance for Child Rights (IACR), and the VHAI. Dr Syeda Hameed addressed the meeting and listened to all those who spoke. She promised her help within the planning commission. On this day, a petition entitled 'Save the IMS Act', was developed and signed by 25 organizations and later sent to the Prime Minister, the President and the Ministers concerned.

Finally, Anil Mokashi from Baramati, arrived on the scene and was requested for help to meet Mr Sharad Pawar, Minister of Agriculture, who headed the group of eight Ministers overseeing repealing of the IMS Act. Anil gladly agreed, fixed up our meeting with him at Delhi, where we went and briefed the Hon'ble Minister. He carefully heard our arguments and sought some clarifications. After having discussed with the department's officers the same day, he assured us the IMS Act would not, after all, be repealed. On April 6th 2005, we read in the press the happy news that the government had responded positively to the controversy and decided not to repeal the IMS Act.

Don't you think, it is another turning point in the history of the breastfeeding movement of India

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