

BREASTFEEDING THE CHILD

A biological norm and a sustainable nectar-providing exercise. By Ramesh Kumar Raja



Nothing on Earth can replace the sweet phenomenon of motherhood. A mother is a mother, after all. Who knows a child better than her? It is only she, who understands the difficulty of her kid, right from the womb till the baby matures to be an adult. But, nurturing a kid is not that easy. It begins with the most pertinent practice of 'breastfeeding', which in fact, is a biological exercise that almost all mothers have to go through on this planet. It strengthens the bond between mother and child.

As it saves lives by providing a complete nutritional and preventive health package for infants and young children, breastfeeding is also very often a health issue that has been revisited. Alas! Many parts of the world are still struggling with low rates of exclusive and continued breastfeeding. Women are not able to breastfeed successfully due to a lack of support from family, the health services, the workplace and the community. With modernisation, the economic activity took over all priorities, resulting in more and more women joining the workforce.

Besides, the baby-food industry has created a huge market for the 'infant formula' as a substitute or complement to breastfeeding. They use all sorts of persistent endorsement techniques to persuade parents undermining women's confidence in breastfeeding, leading to an explosion of formula feeding. The

companies misused health systems in such a manner that it contributed to the separation of mothers and babies, leading to a decline in breastfeeding practice.

The Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) is a non-profit national organisation that has been working for the last two decades with the aim to protect, promote and support breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding of infants and young children. Contributing through advocacy, social mobilisation, information sharing, education, research, training and monitoring the companies' compliance with the IMS Act, the organisation is also the regional focal point for South Asia for the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) and the regional coordinating office for International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), winner of the 1998 Right Livelihood Award (also known as an alternative Nobel Prize).

Taking cognisance of this flagship campaign in India and abroad, we talked to BPNI's co-founder Dr Arun Gupta, who is a paediatrician and gave up his lucrative private practice to jump into this public health cause. He also happens to be a member of the Prime Minister's Council of India's Nutritional Challenges. Dr Gupta also chairs the global Breastfeeding Initiative for Child Survival (gBICS).

Excerpts of an interview:

The story of breastfeeding seems to be losing somewhere, especially with the culture of women preferring office over child nursing. How do you look at this mistreated lifestyle?

Work outside home is an increasing reality, although women work at home all the time. It needs a caring society and recognition of the value of breastfeeding, which we are losing. Breastfeeding is protective for an infant's health and development as 90 per cent of the brain develops during the first two years. Breastfeeding provides that great opportunity apart from the high nutritive value it has for brain development. The formula industry is trying to make a copy of it. At the same time, there are risks of formula feeding, like higher risk of disease among children and adults – even diabetes and obesity. Women must get all this information and guidance on how long breastfeeding continues, with exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, etc.

Every woman should get six months' leave at least. Besides, all corporate sector places should be breastfeeding-friendly with private rooms and creches. The corporate sector is going to gain by this, as women who have their babies close to them will be more productive at work. Many IT companies have announced maternity protection measures recently, more should follow. It is a long-term investment.

What is the importance of the first breastfeeding after childbirth?

Beginning breastfeeding within one hour is a national and international recommendation. It is because skin-to-

skin contact during the first hour is so critical for emotional bonding as well as initiating a good process of successful lactation. Over the first few days, thick milk called colostrum rich in “live” cells and antibodies to protect the baby.

Then babies should receive exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and timely and appropriate complementary feeding after six months along with continued breastfeeding till two years or beyond. Till six months breast milk is all that a baby needs. After six months the baby needs some extra foods, home-made foods that the family eats. Slowly, the quantity is increased to meet the growing demands of the baby.

In rural areas poor health is largely a common issue among the women, which in fact affects the biology of lactation. Don't you think government has a role to play here for the health and well-being of the baby?

While it is critical that women's health and nutrition be given utmost importance, for this and future generations. Let me point out that the state of nutrition of mothers is not related to lactation performance.

The Government of India has a role to play here, not only to ensure food security for women but also to provide caring health workers to counsel mothers, both in rural and urban areas. Lactation performance depends on two hormones, one 'prolactin', which makes milk, and the other 'oxytocin' that makes the milk flow from the breast to the baby. Oxytocin flow depends on the state of mind of the mother. It depresses if she is not confident, has pain, doubts, anxiety, etc. What you need is confidence building measure's rather than information availability.

For this, you need well-trained and caring health workers. This knowledge and skill is lacking. Currently what we are doing is a bit of lip service and gains can rapidly fall off. It is this factor that calls for a special training of workers and government's attention to it.

How far is it fair to promote the 'commercialisation of baby food' at a time when the child mortality rate is not dying down?

It is not at all fair to promote baby foods. In fact, there is a law in the country that bans all kinds of promotion of baby foods, meant for children under the age of two. It also bans baby food industries' sponsorship of conferences of doctors or any incentives for them. Companies continue to break the law. It is recognised that promotion of commercial baby foods actually undermines breastfeeding and causes morbidity and mortality. The government of India has a role to be very strict in enforcing this law that was enacted in 1992.

What is the impact of breastfeeding on IQ and long-term health and development?

It is shown by scientific studies that the higher the breastfeeding, the better the IQs (intelligence quotients). Recent studies also reveal that it enhances the earning ability at 30 years. It is also known that pneumonia and diarrhoea are more in children who are sub-optimally fed – not exclusively breastfed – for the first six months. WHO has analysed that breastfeeding is effective in the long term in reducing obesity, diabetes and blood pressure.

Awareness level of breastfeeding is still not up to the mark. What should be done to improve it?

The Government of India should run a national programme with an objective to enhance rates of breastfeeding, which have been static for 20 years. Each state should take this on a war footing to put in place a “breastfeeding counsellor” for a population of 5000. They should be women and be able to provide 'one-to-one' counselling. In addition to this, adequate maternity leave, supportive work environments for daycare, and crèches are essential. The government should earmark a budget for breastfeeding and infant-feeding protection, promotion and support. Above all, strict enforcement

of the Infant Milk substitutes Feeding Bottles, and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act 1992, and Amendment Act 2003 is critical.

Is there a governance issue linked to breastfeeding?

Yes, there is clearly one. According to a recent assessment of India's policy and programmes done by us there is no policy, no plan of action and a budget attached to it. The Government of India has a National Breastfeeding Committee, but it rests on the website of the Government of India. If this begins working, things can change. This committee can coordinate action in all areas vis-a-vis multisector action that is required in all states of India. There are several policy areas needing urgent attention such as maternity protection, enforcing the law to protect breastfeeding from aggressive promotion of baby foods, health system support to women, and breastfeeding during disasters etc, to mention a few. Breastfeeding rates can go up only if we invest in all policies and programmes and we have to make a beginning from somewhere.

How is the BPNI involved in the cause of breastfeeding and what achievements have it made since its inception in 1991?

We are involved in the advocacy of better policies and imparting skill training to health workers. The major achievements are the IMS Act in 1992 and Amendment Act 2003, as well as Cable TV Regulation Act, banning promotion of baby foods, bottles, etc. The mid-term assessment of the 11th Five-Year Plan recognised this gap and we hope that the 12th Five-Year Plan would address this issue squarely. BPNI is consulted in many child health and nutrition committees of the Government of India. 

Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing.