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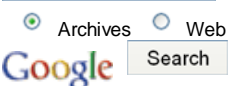
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Censured govt drops child feed plan

CHARU SUDAN KASTURI

New Delhi, May 4: The Centre has quietly abandoned a road map prepared by its own experts to ensure breastfeeding for babies, sparking concerns among health experts that the government is diluting its commitment to the infant life-saving practice.

The National Plan of Action for Infant and Young Child Feeding (NPA-IYCF) was drafted for the period 2007-2011 under instructions from the women and child development ministry (MWCD) issued in 2005.

But a year after the plan was to start operating, the MWCD has now claimed ignorance about the blueprint prepared by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) over 2005 and 2006. The NIPCCD is a premier government research organisation under the MWCD.

The NPA-IYCF drafted by NIPCCD was critical of the government's performance in enforcing laws prohibiting the promotion of infant milk substitutes and feeding bottles in public.

Exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months increases the chance of a child surviving by nearly fifty per cent, according to a paper published by the UK based medical journal *Lancet*.

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"The government appears to be deliberately sabotaging the country's breastfeeding programme," said Dr Arun Gupta, National Coordinator of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), an NGO that works closely with the government.

At a January 28, 2005, meeting of the National Breastfeeding Committee (NBC) — the country's top advisory panel of the subject, the MWCD had asked NIPCCD to draft a National Plan of Action on Breastfeeding.

The meeting decided that NIPCCD would be assisted in the task by the BPNI. Minutes of the meeting — a copy is available with **The Telegraph** — reveal that the meeting was chaired by the then joint secretary in charge of child nutrition.

A letter from a director in the MWCD to the NIPCCD confirms that the ministry received the breastfeeding plan of action. Yet, in February this year, the MWCD's Food and Nutrition Board (FNB) sent a letter to a BPNI official claiming that "this ministry has not received any plan of action on breastfeeding from any source." **The Telegraph** has copies of both these letters.

The plan called for increased funding for the breastfeeding programme, a nation-wide awareness project, and asked the NBC to meet more frequently than it does — the January 2005 meeting was the committee's last.

But sources in the MWCD point to a criticism in the plan of the role of the NBC coordinator — normally a senior ministry official — as a reason why it was dropped.

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