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'India's infant health scenario dismal'

Himanshi Dhawan, TNN 25 November 2008, 04:35am IST

NEW DELHI: They don't have a vote but the future depends on them. The five states -- where the election process is on -- could do well to concentrate on infant health indices that are poor to say the least.

While Delhi ranks 9th (out of 29 states) in infant mortality rate, it is a pathetic 19th in exclusive breastfeeding (that is only 34.5% of women breastfeed exclusively for 6 months) and 22nd in initiating breastfeeding within the first one hour. Only 29.9% children in Delhi are given ORS during diarrhoea.

Rajasthan -- though governed by a woman -- ranks 22nd in IMR and nearly bottom of the heap when it comes to immunisation while Jammu and Kashmir is ranked 14th in IMR. Each of the five states going to elections now -- J&K, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Mizoram and Rajasthan -- fare dismally in critical infant health elements like breastfeeding rates, immunization and ORS use in diarrhoea.

These facts have been highlighted in the report cards published by Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) on the state of infant health in the country.

"There is a strong need to have political will to address infant health and nutrition issues which should be included in the political agenda and the election manifestos of various political parties," said Dr Arun Gupta, BPNI national coordinator and member of the PM's National Council on Nutritional Challenges.

Health and adequate nutrition are fundamental rights of every infant. But unfortunately, not every state has given it due importance. An exception to this is Mizoram where infant health indices are better than the rest. Its IMR is low at 34.1% and it has nearly 67% women breastfeeding within an hour of delivery. Compared to that, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh come across as the worst with IMR as high as 70.8% and 69.5%.

According to the National Family Health Survey-3, percentage of underweight children increases from about 16% to 30% by the time they are 6 months. That would mean action would have to take place during pregnancy, so that mothers receive adequate care and nutrition, women are supported at birth for safe delivery and beginning of breastfeeding within 1 hour, and exclusive breastfeeding is ensured for the first six months of life.

The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life and continued breastfeeding along with adequate complimentary foods for two years or beyond to reduce infant mortality linked to undernutrition, acute respiratory infection, diarrhoea and other infectious diseases. Breastfeeding also contributes to the health of mothers.

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