

Changing age-old mindsets

Kreeanne Rabadi *explains why there is an urgent need to enhance knowledge and change attitudes towards the practice of breastfeeding in India*

Breastfeeding is a fundamental right of all newborn children. Sadly this right is impeded on, especially in rural India where superstitious beliefs are rampant in villages, often creating hurdles that impact the health of newborns.

One such village is Vijanagar in Gariyaband district of Chhattisgarh. It is located on the Odisha border, in a far flung area surrounded by rugged terrain. Dominated by tribals, particularly those belonging to the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs), this community is a very superstitious. So much so that they refuse to breastfeed the first milk of the new born baby because they largely believe that colostrum is bad for newborns.

Colostrum is the first milk excreted by the mother just after giving birth to her child. The sticky, yellowish substance is extremely important for the baby. It contains the necessary immune cells, nutrients, vitamin A, sodium and antibodies which have a laxative effect and encourages the passing of the baby's first stool. The concentration of protein in it is higher than that of the normal breast-milk and includes less of fats and carbohydrates. Colostrum not only provides the essential nutrients in the right proportion but it also boosts the immune system of the newborn baby. Sadly, the village community considers it to be unhealthy, too heavy, and bad for consumption.

As a result, 28 year old Rukmani Bai claims she never fed colostrum to her first two children when she delivered them.

Due to certain conservative beliefs held by her mother-in-law, her first two children (now 9 and 4 years of age) were delivered at home. Moreover, they weren't even breastfed. Her

mother-in-law discouraged her from feeding colostrum to her third child too, but Rukmani refused to comply this time round.

It was only during her third pregnancy, when Rukmani with support from CRY partner Lok Astha Seva Sansthan, made a decision to do things the right way. She registered herself with an Aanganwadi and paid special attention to her own eating habits. But Rukmani Bai's mother-in-law needed to be convinced. So Nandkumar, a worker with Lok Astha Seva Sansthan during the course of his several visits to the village as part of his community work impressed upon her the importance of having the pregnancy registered at an Aanganwadi. He explained to her and Rukmini Bai the benefits of a complete nutritious diet, timely immunizations and importance of which they were previously unaware of.

Despite the constant dialogues, the mother-in-law often discouraged Rukmani from visiting the Aanganwadi. She believed that having a nutritious diet would make the child bigger inside the womb, causing problems in delivery. She also prevented her from sitting at the threshold of the house she lived in.

On learning this from Rukmini, Nandkumar didn't give up and worked further on building the perspective of the mother-in-law with the help of a Flip Chart. This has a set of self explanatory charts with pictures and write-ups regarding the five integral services provided by the Aanganwadi, the benefits of enrolling pregnant women in an Aanganwadi and the importance of breastfeeding and colostrum.

Nandkumar educates Rukmini and other community members with the help of these Flip Charts.

Nandkumar's continuous efforts paid off when the mother-in-law began taking a keen interest in Rukmani and refrained from pressurising her further. The latter soon gave birth to a healthy baby girl that weighed two kilos and 900 grams.

After giving the baby her first milk (colostrum) Rukmani too was given food at regular intervals so that she did not go hungry. This time, the mother-in-law did not stop her from eating like she used to do in the past.

Regular immunizations and health checkups of the mother along with post natal check-ups were done. Similarly there was regular weight checking and bathing of the child. For the next six months the baby's diet was her mother's milk, after which she was given other foods. Rukmani too was fed adequate amounts of green vegetables, eggs and fish at regular intervals to boost the flow of milk.

The baby girl Isha is a little over a year now and very healthy.

One of the most poorest states in the country, less than 50% of the infants in Chhattisgarh are breastfed within an hour of birth (NFHS 4, 2015-16).

As per the data 47.1% children were breastfed with colostrum and 77.2% children were exclusively breastfed (0-6 months). If we compare aforesaid data with NFHS data of 2005-06, we see that during 2005-06 only 24.6% children were breastfed with colostrum. Hence we see that in a span of 10 years there is an increase of 22.5% percentage points of children who are breastfed with colostrums, which is encouraging.

There are however many villages in India where children do not get a healthy start like Isha did. Only around 40% of the children in India are breastfed within an hour of birth (NFHS 4 2015-16).

The government is taking some positive steps like: promotion of institutional deliveries; implementation of MAMTA diwas where AWW (Aanganwadi Worker) and ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwifery) along with ASHA workers are holding meetings with pregnant and lactating women and are sensitizing them regarding breastfeeding; Mathari Shakti Yojana where nutritious food is provided by AWC to BPL pregnant women. But it is just not enough. Superstitions and traditional beliefs can only be combated with concrete education programs and methods coupled by awareness disseminating programs on various stigmas pertaining to breastfeeding.

As we celebrate World Breastfeeding Week, let's make a pledge to give mothers the attention and the education that they need so that all children in India get a healthy start to life.

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