

It is now evident and well documented that a Bharatiya-Baccha is under a lot of stress from the day it is conceived. 38% of them are stunted and 28% of them have low birth-weight -the fourth highest percentage in the world! It has to pass many survival hurdles to reach the age of five. The ordeal continues in the school for those who are fortunate to get admitted. The short-sighted founding fathers of the nation did not place much emphasis on the welfare and empowerment of women and the development of the infant into a child to an adult, instead placed the precious limited resources for building “temples of modern India” and centres of excellence like IITs/IIMs for the elite. English speaking students who studied here on huge subsidies left the country to settle abroad, giving nothing in return. The temples of modern India have silted up and the commanding heights have gone into astounding depths. Quality of life of an average child in India is abysmally low, compared to those in developed countries. With 65% of population below 35 years now, the great demographic dividend we claim now, in reality, is of a poor quality compared to those of our neighbouring countries like China and other East Asian “Tiger” countries.

Governments have woken-up belatedly and have been making efforts to rectify it. Policy initiatives like National Policies for Children-1974/2013, National policy for education-1986, National Nutrition Policy-1993, National Charter for Children-2003, National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy-2013, India New Born Action Plan-2014 etc have set action commitments to honour the obligations enshrined in our Constitution. Based on these policies, many schemes like ICDS to address the need for early childhood care, implementation of immunisation programmes since 1978 to protect children from avertable life-threatening diseases, Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS-2009), National Nutrition Mission etc were launched.

For a strong foundation for a healthy India, (atleast in the next generation), the government should focus its attention for “begetting healthy babies and ensure them a stress free childhood”. Scientific studies and statistical data confirm that a healthy baby is associated with an educated woman, empowered to take her own decisions. She should have power to decide on contraception, pregnancies and its spacing and the number of children. Government should facilitate and ensure - good nutritious food for a non- anaemic healthy mother, 100% institutional deliveries, post partum care, good health care for the child, and its immunisation. It should be the guardian-angel in the first “1000 days” of the child from its day of conception and its mother.

The central government have come up with many schemes for mother and child welfare, though “Health” is primarily a state subject. A well trained committed set of ASHA workers have been created to ensure success of this mission. Many states have also pitched in to supplement these initiatives. eg KCR kits in Telangana and Amma vadi in Andhra Pradesh.

The mothers should be made are of the minimum dietary diversity and the minimum feeding frequency for a child. Breast feeding for atleast six months should

be insisted. Hygienic conditions around the infant must be improved as diarrhoea and Water and sanitation related diseases are a major causes for unhealthy childhood. The incidence of stunting happens within the first 6-18 months of a child and cannot be reversed. Hence good nutritious, timely and adequate food should be ensured for the child during the period with the help of Anganwadi workers. ASHAs should follow up on the immunisation. Once a child reaches its fifth year, his/her enrolment in the nearby school and retention should be ensured. Family and society can play a major role in retention of the child in a school and preventing child labor. Government should ensure easy access to schools, relevant syllabus and quality teachers in the schools for these children. Education should be free and compulsory reinforcing the value systems and healthy cultural ethos. Mid Day Meals should be implemented in the schools to feed the children. If these are ensured, we may have a good healthy generation.

After all, a healthy generation is the basis for higher Gross National Happiness!