

## Polio-free India

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It was target 2000. World had a major task. After smallpox eradication, interrupting the polio transmission globally by year 2000, was seen as an over ambitious project. By year 1999, the cases of polio were brought down to just over 5000 worldwide. The epicenters for these cases were less than a dozen countries from South Asia and Central/Western Africa. India happened to be one of them.

In India, it all began in 1978, when oral polio vaccine was included in the immunization schedule. It took another 12 years, to conduct the first Pulse Polio Immunization Program in 1990. An integrated effort was required. India was running late. The transmission of polio was already interrupted in major parts of the world by 2000. India had to replicate the success of these countries. The task was daunting. India's polio eradication policy had to be innovative, to tackle its indigenous obstacles. Our poor sanitation and hygiene and public health care system made the experts think that India could be the last country to achieve this target [1]. The Government of India, in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO) had started the National Polio Surveillance Project (NPSP) in 1997. The NPSP began to assume greater importance as it provided the technical support in polio surveillance and mass campaigns for immunizations.

The Pulse Polio which started as a booth activity was turned into a house to house operation. Finger marking of vaccinated child were started in 1999. This helped in identifying the missing/unimmunized child. The strategy to put vaccinators at transit site was indeed innovative. These transit sites included bus and railway stations, roads, and markets. Gatherings like festivals and fairs were taken as an opportunity to vaccinate large number of children in a short span of time. The migratory population which often missed the immunization operations were began to be targeted from 2007. The role of social mobilization network was started to reach the community in high-risk areas like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The religious leaders were approached to support the cause and spread the message of Pulse Polio. This was a major confidence building measure among a few communities, which has some apprehensions about the vaccine. The inaccessible areas, especially along the Kosi

river basin in Bihar began to be targeted in 2008 with plans like satellite offices and overnight stays. The introduction of bivalent oral polio vaccine in 2010 helped decrease the transmission of type 1 virus to a very low level. Mass media campaigning with celebrities helped made a greater impact of the message to immunize.

The basic strategy remained same; to maintain the high level of immunization, observance of national immunization days, surveillance of all cases of acute flaccid paralysis and finally the mop-up immunization. The integrative effort along with innovative steps helped India record its last case on January 13, 2011 from West Bengal. India was removed from the list of "polio endemic" countries on February 25, 2012 [2]. And finally the dawn of a new and healthier India arrived on March 27, 2014. On this day, India was declared "polio free" by WHO-South East Region. It was a victory not only for a Government, but also to the 2.3 million vaccinators and 155,000 supervisors who kept the torch burning until we had achieved the target. It also meant that a population of 1.2 billion people was safe from a debilitating disease.

India was among the 11 countries, which were declared polio free in South East Asia. This also made the WHO South East Region to be the fourth WHO Region to achieve this landmark. This achievement also meant that 80% of the globe is now free of polio. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria are the only three countries, which now remain endemic. The future of the polio program lies in the introduction of inactivated polio vaccine by 2015, with the aim to achieve a polio-free world by 2018.

### References

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