

Polio Free India - Achievements and Risks

27 March 2014 is a red letter day in the Public health history of India, when India, along with 10 other countries in South-east Asian region of WHO was declared polio-free. By that time over three years had passed after the last wild polio virus was identified on 13 January 2011 in Panchla block of Howrah district of West Bengal.

This achievement has dumbbed many international and national critics who had commented that India would be the last country in the world to clear polio and also criticised the polio eradication strategy adopted by India .

What made this so called "unbelievable" possible ?

The very important were the highest level of political commitment at national and state levels, excellent support by major partners – WHO, UNICEF, Rotary International and CDC Atlanta, high quality of laboratory and field based research for development of new vaccines and immunisation strategies – bivalent oral polio vaccine that was first used in 2010 and gave the final blow to circulating type 1 and type 3 wild polio virus, was a product of research carried out in India.

But the most important factor were millions of vaccinators from health and non-health sectors who had literally knocked at every door from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Kutch (Gujarat) to Lohit (Arunachal), multiple times a year to ensure two drops of oral polio vaccine to each and every child in the country. Extremes of weather, floods, landslides, poor law and order, could not prevent these dedicated missionaries from carrying out their mission.

But in the light of ongoing wild polio virus circulation in three endemic countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria and in number of African and middle eastern countries affected by wild polio virus importation, our achievement appears fragile. High degree of international population movement in this jet age, may bring wild polio virus any time to India, till polio is anywhere on this globe.

Our top priority today and till the world is declared polio-free, is to maintain a very high level of immunity against polio in our child population. This can only be achieved through sustained high level of routine immunisation with polio vaccine and time to time national / sub national immunisation days; ensuring that no pockets is left poorly immunised both in routine programme and in campaign.

Based on recent research findings, government is going to introduce IPV (inactivated polio vaccine) in our national immunisation schedule in near future.

Simultaneously, we will have to maintain a highly sensitive surveillance system for AFP (acute flaccid paralysis) to identify any importation of wild polio virus or emergence of VDPV (vaccine derived polio virus).

We have crossed one hurdle – made the country and region polio-free. We will have to run with greater zeal and enthusiasm to complete the race and reach the finishing line – a polio-free world !

– R. N. Haldar
