

## Meerut's war on polio finds a global face

Munzareen Fatima is hardly the toast of Indian showbiz - but the tough Meerut housewife clad in a burqa and a lace shawl covering her head is India's new face at the 2009 Oscar awards.

Fatima, a field worker, is one of the leading lights of the 'The Final Inch', a 38-minute documentary about the global effort to eradicate polio.

'It has been a tough journey for me over the last five years to convince 470 families at Dufferin block in Khairnagar to administer polio drops to their children. I met with resistance from the families, who initially refused to immunise their children. The conservative community also belittled me for stepping out of home to campaign against polio,' Munzareen told the media.

Munzareen, a part of UNICEF's Social Mobilisation Network, was here to share her experiences at the behest of the UN wing.

A devout Muslim, Munzareen juggles many roles in life. She is a dutiful daughter-in-law, mother of three and wife.

Munzareen Baaji, as she is known, supports her family through her work as a motivator.

Munzareen reaches out to her target group through personal and public intervention programmes. She hosts 'Mata Baithak' - mothers' meets- and 'Ijtema' - a religious-cum-awareness discourse - twice every month to preach the need to administer oral polio vaccines to children.

The common fears among the marginalised communities of Meerut and western Uttar Pradesh are that polio drops breed infertility, harm children and are against the tenets of religion. Most often, family elders oppose immunisation.

'I convened an 'ijtema' yesterday (Wednesday) where I first read from the Quran, and then discussed how to relate to one's neighbours. At the end of it, I discoursed on the importance of oral polio drops for children,' Munzareen said.

According to the field worker, religion and discussions on social issues help forge better rapport with the families, most of whom are poor and ignorant.

'I tell them that in Saudi Arabia there is no polio and even Haj pilgrims have to be immunised against polio before the pilgrimage. I had to read the Quran to talk to my audience,' Munzareen said.

She is always armed with a booklet of appeals issued by the Darul Uloom of Deoband, the Aligarh Muslim University and the Haj Committee to substantiate that her campaign against polio has official sanction.

Munzareen cherishes funny memories of shooting for 'The Final Inch'.

'Even though I was clad in a burqa, my community threatened to beat the camera crew, saying Islam did not allow strangers to photograph women. I was forced to talk to the community. It is difficult for a woman like me to break new ground,' she recalled with a laugh.

Directed by Irene Taylor Brodsky, 'The Final Inch' takes viewers on a journey into the global mission to eradicate polio in India.

'India is among the four countries - along with Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan - where polio still exists. The movie tries to drive home the message that we are almost there - on the eradication front,' Lieven Desomer, chief of the UNICEF's polio section in India, told IANS.

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