

## From rat-eaters to flag bearers of Bihar's anti-polio drive

For years the Musahars have been looked down upon for being rat-eaters. Deprived, illiterate and often completely untouched by health initiatives, this very community is now helping Bihar fight its big battle against polio.

It was roped in for implementation of the National Polio Surveillance Project (NPSP) in Saharsa district four months ago after polio teams found it difficult to effectively communicate with over 112,000 Musahars here.

'Almost 95 percent of people in the community are illiterate and poor. They don't understand our language and it was very difficult to make them understand the benefits of polio vaccination,' Bhagwan Chaudhury, a block mobilization coordinator in Murali village in Aarapatti block of Saharsa, told IANS.

Saharsa is one of the high-risk districts of north central Bihar that has this year reported 22 cases of polio - a crippling disease that affects children under five. The state in fact reported the highest incidence of the P1 virus strain in the country.

'Four months back we selected five men from the community and trained them as underserved community mobilisation coordinators (CMC) to spread awareness about the disease within their community.'

Murali village is home to 70 Musahar families that live in mud houses and work as labourers in paddy fields.

'We found that children of the Musahar community were left out in the polio immunisation drive as polio workers used to avoid visiting them due to their being Maha Dalits, the poorest Dalits,' said Chaudhury.

Regarded as 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste hierarchy, the Musahars usually hunt rats in paddy fields for survival. They live in difficult-to-access areas within the embankment areas of Kosi river.

For the NPSP team it was not an easy task to train people from the Musahar community and they developed interactive training methods to educate them about the disease.

'They were not educated and it was useless trying to make them understand the gravity of the situation through facts and figures. We made posters, street plays and games to communicate with them,' he said.

Suresh Sada, an underserved CMC from the community, said: 'Every month before the polio immunisation round, we go from house-to-house asking people, especially mothers, to get their children vaccinated. We had conducted several meetings, informing mothers about the disease and the need for vaccination.'

'The Musahar women are shy and they don't open up easily and it took us some time to counsel them. Now, the majority know about polio and they don't refuse to get their children immunised, which was not the case before,' said the 35-year-old.

Sada and his team works for 10 to 12 hours a day for a meager amount of Rs.175 for almost a week before the monthly immunisation drive.

'We prepare a list of children below five years, newborn who are born after the last immunisation round, mark houses, take out rallies, counsel mothers before the polio round. And post immunisation we have to track the children who did not take the vaccine for various reasons like either they were not at home, were sick, house was locked so that not even a single children is left,' said Ram Charan, another worker from the community.

Their hard work has started bearing fruit as all the children in the community are being vaccinated and people have become aware about its importance.

'Every month I ensure my children take the vaccine as it is beneficial for them and will prevent them from being handicapped,' said Sita Devi, a mother of two under-five children from the community.

Anmola Devi, an anganwadi worker in the village, said: 'The women from the community now come for the mothers' meetings held before the monthly immunization round. We tell them the importance of sanitation and cleanliness to prevent the spread of virus among children.'

According to NPSP, Bihar so far has reported 110 polio cases, 38 are of the highly infectious polio strain virus P1 and the remaining are the P3 strain cases.

'Accessibility is the biggest challenge in eradicating polio in areas in the embankment of Kosi river. These areas are flooded for four months a year and movement is possible only through boats, horses and motorbikes. At times it taken hours to travel to a small hamlet to deliver polio vaccine,' said Heman Shukla, regional team Leader, NPSP.

The Musahars, estimated to number 2.3 million, are yet to taste the fruits of development. They are widely known as rat eaters either out of choice or as compulsion to fight hunger.

But they are now proving their mettle in India's fight against polio.

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