



WHEN ONE-FOURTH SEEMS LIKE WHOLE

Baluwah Bajahur, Mirzapur
begins to embrace
Immunization

A Hamlet Left Behind

Deep inside Mirzapur's Rajgarh block in Uttar Pradesh, Baluwah Bajahur is a small hamlet, home to the Musahar community, one of India's most marginalized Scheduled Castes, life here is a daily struggle with poverty, low literacy, and deep social discrimination.

While Mirzapur district shows a strong overall immunization coverage of 83 per cent, isolated communities like the Musahars are often left out. Many families work as landless agricultural labourers and live in tight clusters, wary of outsiders and suspicious of government services. They avoid vaccination for the fear that vaccines could harm their children or cause infertility.

Finding the Zero-Dose Children

When UNICEF's partner, IPE Global Centre for Knowledge and Development (CKD), began work in the area as part of GAVI supported zero-dose implementation plan, they found 18 children who had not received a single vaccine. Two of them were sisters, Sangeeta and Anita, born at home and unknown to the health system.

When the local ASHA and Anganwadi worker visited the girls' house with the CKD team, their mother barely looked up from her card game with neighbors. She refused to listen or engage. The team left that day knowing that they needed some other strategy to get response from her and her likes.

Turning to the Children

They came back the next day—not with lectures, but with a new plan. They gathered the older children—Niharika, Anshika, Mahesh—and did a simple role-play about vaccines and how they protect against deadly diseases like measles and polio.

Excited to perform, the children called their mothers to watch. Slowly, a few mothers gathered around. What began as a playful skit turned into an impromptu mothers group meeting. The cluster coordinator started a friendly discussion on the benefits of vaccination through story telling. She described vaccines as an invisible shield safeguarding children from life threatening illnesses such as measles, polio, and diphtheria,. She directly confronted the infertility myth, presenting authentic examples from their own village where other vaccinated children were safe and healthy! A few mothers asked questions and were satisfied with the answers, thus lowering their skepticism of routine immunization.

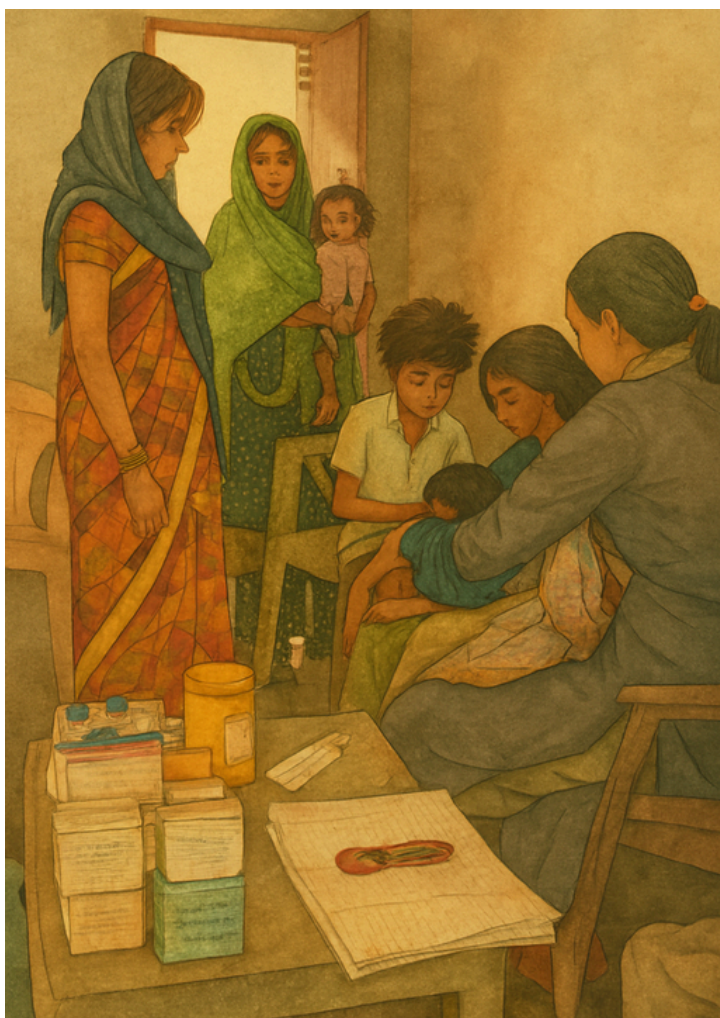
The hook that changed their mind-set was that someone from outside was concerned and helping them. These mothers knew about immunization but were hesitant to take the first step as community norms were strong against Government services. The team understood that instead of focusing on knowledge the need is to create an enabling environment and change the negative norms through trust building initiatives.

Building Trust, Changing Minds

In consultation with the health department, IPE-Global CKD team commenced community mobilization activities focusing on trust building, involving and sensitizing local influencers like the Pradhan and ration dealer people trusted by the community. With their help, word spread that vaccines were safe and that it was time to protect the children. After intensive mobilization activities spanning 2-3 weeks, signs of change were visible. Five out of the 18 zero-dose children got their shots, including Sangeeta and Anita. There is more work to do: 13 children still need to be vaccinated, but the community is no longer hiding behind closed doors

A New Conversation

With nearly one-fourth of the unimmunized children vaccinated, and community no longer wary of the immunization, this one-fourth achievement seems like a whole victory. Now there is hope that soon, the remaining children will also get vaccinated. This hope stems from mothers who once stayed silent but now share what they learned with others. The ASHA who was once ignored now receives calls about when the next immunization session will be held, Sangita and Anita's mother still plays cards, but also values her daughters' MCP cards. Families, health workers, local leaders, and partners are now working together to protect every child and that is whole victory.



“I believed that vaccines would be harmful to my daughters, Now I understand that they are protecting my children! I was blinded by fear and anger before but now I understand how foolish I was! I am thankful now that my daughters are safe from 12 diseases.”

SANGEETA AND ANITA'S MOTHER, AS SHE GET HER TWIN VACCINATED FOR THE FIRST TIME