

# India lags behind in infant feeding practices

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**New Delhi:** India continues to falter in infant and child feeding practises, ranking far below neighbours like Sri Lanka, China, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan. India was ranked 25 among 33 developing countries on parameters including early initiation of breastfeeding practises, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, complementary feeding and bottle feeding rates.

Despite high economic growth and growing literacy levels, India scored only 69 out of 150 in a study conducted by World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTI). The report — 'State of breastfeeding in 33 countries: 2010, tracking infant and young child feeding policies and programmes worldwide' — identifies specific gaps and makes recommendations in each country. A cause for concern is that exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months has remained stagnant at 46% since 1998 (according to National Family Health Survey



data) in India while bottle feeding has gone up from 13.4% in 1998 to 17.3% in 2005-2006.

Poor policies and lack of support for mothers have led to under-nutrition and infant deaths in 33 countries analysed. Out of 78 million children born each year, 42 million are sub-optimally fed. For India, these numbers are 26 million born and 20 million not given optimal feeding.

Speaking on the report, Norwegian ambassador Ann Ollestad said, "High and booming economic growth does not translate into better policies in preventing child mortality. Every country should promote and encourage policy planning and women must empower themselves."

Dr Arun Gupta, International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) regional coordinator, said, "Over 78 million births take place in the 33 countries surveyed — more than half of the babies born world over — yet only about 36 million are exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months. That shows it all. Much more needs to be done to support women with maternity protection to enable them to combine breastfeeding with returning to work."

The report recommends comprehensive policy, tackling infant and child feeding practises, monitoring through a national level committee and effective maternal protection through awareness, maternity entitlements and counselling.