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## **Protest against move to repeal IMS Act**

By Gargi Parsai

NEW DELHI, FEB. 15. "Every child has the right to be adequately nourished. Breastfeeding is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants. It provides biological and emotional basis for the good health of both, the mother and the child. It protects infants from infectious diseases." This forms the basis of the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Feeds (Regulation of production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003, which the Centre now proposes to repeal in the proposed Food Safety and Standards Bill, 2005.

The move is meant to bring the regulation of infant food industry under the proposed Food Safety Bill, which would give an edge to manufacturers of baby milk powder and feeding bottles.

The IMS Act — which is sought to be repealed — seeks to promote breastfeeding by curbing unethical marketing and promotional practices by baby food industries that "denigrate mother's milk or interfere with breastfeeding."

### **Will open floodgates**

Several concerned citizens and NGOs fear that the repeal of the Act would open the floodgates for "unhealthy marketing practices of infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles and infant foods."

After a meeting here last week, representatives of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, India Alliance for Child Rights and Voluntary Health Association of India and other organisations said repeal of the Act would take away the initiative for promotion of exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months to which the Government is a signatory with the WHO and U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Arun Gupta, Vandana Prasad, Mira Shiva and Razia Ismail Abbasi said the consequences would compromise the health and nutrition of infants and young children. The infant milk food production in 1990-91 was 60,000 metric tonnes with the market estimated at Rs. 720 crores (in 1991) growing at around six per cent annually.

### **Free samples**

Free samples were distributed in the lower middleclass and low-income groups to "create a need where none exists." Studies in developed countries show that babies who are totally bottle-fed are four to seven times more vulnerable to disease, Dr. Shiva said.

According to Dr. Gupta either there had been a gross error in including the IMS Act in the list of the repealed Acts "or there is a deliberate effort by vested interests to repeal it."

The doctors and NGOs have sent joint protest letters to the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam,

the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and the Group of Ministers on the Food Safety Bill, headed by the Food and Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar.

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