

As part of the human interest section of the *Lincoln County Herald*, the editor wants to include this article on breastfeeding vs. formula in India. The editor has given it to Chandra Mistry to edit for printing. Chandra was raised in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. She grew up speaking English, and all her schooling has been in English. She has lived in Starkville, Mississippi for the past 15 years. Chandra feels that the British spellings should be preserved to keep the “international flavor” of the article. She believes Southern audiences will have no trouble with the spellings and may enjoy colorful language such as “damp squib.” She wants to change the amount of rupees into dollars and change the punctuation to standard American journalism punctuation. She has marked her suggested changes in red.

The killer still at large

A year ago, nations of the world angrily and almost unanimously called for a ban on the promotion of baby milk powder. Yet the WHO resolution, then hailed as a major Third World victory over mighty multinationals, is slowly turning out to be a damp squib. Hardly any government -- from Bangladesh and India in Asia to Mexico in Latin America -- has cared to translate the resolution into real action back home.

The switch from breast-feeding to bottle-feeding has been described by many scientists as the most dramatic change to have occurred in biological behaviour since human beings emerged. But it has now been proved to be a harmful form of modernisation encouraged by unethical marketing practices of private companies. These include sending sales representatives to maternity wards dressed as nurses to advise mothers that milk powder is best for their babies.

India presents probably the most dramatic case of a weakening in political will over the last year to control milk powder companies -- notwithstanding Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's rousing speech in Geneva at the WHO. A working group of the ministry of social welfare had formulated a code for marketing of milk powder even before the WHO meeting began in May 1981. The code stipulates not just a ban on advertising of milk powder but also of weaning foods. But instead of becoming national legislation by now, the code still remains a confidential document. Even though 24 out of 25 members of the working group signed the final report nearly a year ago, the 25th member still has to sign it. The government has not yet stopped advertising of milk powder on television, either.

The pressure on the Indian government has come from Amul, India's leading milk powder manufacturer. Its managers insist that a ban on advertising milk powder is unnecessary because only about two per cent of Indian babies are bottle-fed, and these are mainly rich children with access to clean water.

R K Anand, a leading breast-feeding compaigner who was a member of the government's working group, strongly disputes these claims of milk powder manufacturers. He points out that studies have shown that the incidence of bottle-feeding in urban areas across India varies from 10 to 28.6 per cent in poor families and 60 per cent in middle class families. In his own hospital -- the Nair Charitable Hospital in Bombay—Anand studied 200 consecutive infants admitted to the paediatric ward. Some 55 per cent of these infants were being bottle-fed. Over three-fourths of the parents earned less than Rs 150, or \$3, per month. Nearly half the mothers bottle feeding were illiterate. Nine out of 10 bottle-fed babies came from homes without continuous water supply. Out of these 200 babies, 13 eventually died. All of them were bottle fed.

The problem is, therefore, increasing among the urban poor and is slowly spreading even to rural areas. Augustine Veliath of the Voluntary

Health Agencies of India in New Delhi says, "I have traveled across the country from one end to the other and have yet to find a rural chemist who does not stock at least five brands of baby food." Various voluntary organizations recently set up the National Alliance for the Nutrition of Infants (NANI) to campaign for the implementation of the code formulated by the ministry of social welfare.

According to them, the ultimate question really is whether a poor society should allow commercial interests to distort popular feeding habits. Use of milk powder is well recognized to be dangerous for the poor and, therefore, must be prevented from reaching them. As the habits of the rich set the trends for the poor to imitate, it is only legitimate that the rich, too, must be disallowed from indulging in such socially harmful extravagance.