

## No Place For Girls in Rajasthan?

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**Jaisalmer:** Female infanticide or killing new-born girls after birth continues in some parts of Rajasthan even today. In three blocks in Jaisalmer district - Sam, Sankra and Jaisalmer - 54 new-born girls died in the last one year.

Bhaum Singh Bhati has been campaigning against female infanticide in 40 villages in the Jaisalmer district. He says the administration never takes any step against the culprits despite repeated complaints. It was only after an Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) filed a report in Chhor village which said that a new-born baby girl had been starved to death by denying her breast milk that the administration was forced to take up the matter. The body of the baby was exhumed with two others and post-mortem conducted but cause of death could not be established.

"They put sand, hot water or opium in the mouth of the new-born. The ANMs and other health workers know about it but they never submit their report to higher authorities because they are afraid. Also, they have to live in the same village," said Mr Bhati.

Of the 54 new-born girls who died in the last one year in three blocks of Jaisalmer, two new-borns were not breast fed. They died within 24 and 48 hours after birth; one died after frothing in the mouth; eight died of unknown causes; and two because they were underweight which is not considered a cause of death.

This has been taken up by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPDR), which links the deaths to the money given to the mothers for hospital deliveries. Each mother gets free transport, medicines, food as well as Rs. 1400 - a substantial sum in rural Rajasthan. It has asked

the state government to take strict action.

"You find, there has been a growth in institutional deliveries and there has been an incentivisation for growth in institutional deliveries. But while the money has been disbursed, children are lost and have disappeared, especially girl children. So this, one will have to really scrutinize and examine how both can be possible... We have sent letters but I think it is appalling that there is such indifference as you go higher up," said Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, NCPCR.

Despite these disturbing figures of deaths due to unknown causes, the government remains evasive.

"This is happening not just in border areas but in Jaipur also... So, it is not limited to a particular area or a community," said AA Ahmad, Health Minister, Rajasthan.

This unwillingness to take any step to prevent such practices combined with the deeply entrenched animosity towards the girl child is likely to cost more lives, but also jeopardise successful health schemes like the Janani Suraksha Yojana meant for safe deliveries.