



U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

# SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

## HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaign Dispels Common Misconceptions Surrounding Methods of Infection

NEARLY 4 MILLION PEOPLE IN INDIA are infected with HIV—the second highest figure in the world. Staggering misconceptions about how HIV is transmitted and a reluctance to publicly discuss the disease fuel its spread.

But an innovative and aggressive HIV/AIDS education and awareness campaign implemented in 12 major port communities across India is helping to dispel widespread myths surrounding HIV/AIDS and to open channels of communication, enabling those who are at high risk for infection to learn how to steer clear of the disease.

The campaign—implemented by Population Services International, with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development—features several components. In Mumbai, it revolves around Balbir Pasha, a fictional character the target audience of young, urban men can relate to, learn from, and empathize with. Balbir is portrayed in a series of identifiable, real-life sexual situations in which he runs the risk of contracting HIV. Scenarios concern the use of alcohol and “forgetting” to use a condom, the mistaken belief that having a regular partner (even a prostitute or casual partner) means one is safe from HIV/AIDS infection, and the misconception that if one’s partner looks healthy, he or she must be free of HIV/AIDS.

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Presented in an approachable, familiar manner, Balbir Pasha succeeds in personalizing HIV risk and bringing the topic of HIV/AIDS into the open. “It makes us sit up and take note of AIDS. It speaks to people in a language they understand,” notes one viewer.

A 2003 impact evaluation survey found a marked improvement in the respondents’ understanding of how HIV is transmitted and a consequent change in attitudes and behavior. Calls to an HIV/AIDS hotline featured in the campaign increased by 250 percent. More than half of the respondents had talked about a Balbir Pasha advertisement with someone else. And in the

ultimate sign of the campaign’s success, Balbir Pasha has been featured in parodies and take-off advertising by leading Indian companies looking to profit from his popularity.

Given its wide reach and frank, hard-hitting style, the Balbir Pasha campaign has, not surprisingly, also met with some criticism. But one thing is difficult to dispute. In Mumbai, Balbir Pasha has people talking—and that’s a good thing.

Photo courtesy of Population Services International



A still image from a commercial features two men pondering the ever-present question, “Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?”

India, October 2003