



# Balbir Pasha:

## *HIV/AIDS Campaign is the Talk of Mumbai*

PSI/India has broken new ground in HIV/AIDS awareness by creating a fictional character—Balbir Pasha—who has become the talk of Mumbai. During four months in late 2002 and early 2003, the on-going saga of Balbir Pasha was the hot topic of conversation around tea shops and bus stops in Mumbai, the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic in India. Research shows that the campaign had a significant impact on members of the target group and greatly changed their attitudes towards risky behavior.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Balbir Pasha has been very flattered indeed, having been imitated by mass media and commercial advertising campaigns in Mumbai which have sought to capitalize on the name recognition of Balbir Pasha.

### **HIV/AIDS in India**

About 4 million Indians are infected with HIV, second only to South Africa, and an estimated 80% are the result of heterosexual transmission. The epidemic is centered in Mumbai, a city of over 14 million people. Research exposed staggering misconceptions surrounding HIV transmission and risk assessment. One in every three men who visited a commercial sex worker (CSW) was unaware that a healthy looking individual could carry HIV. Men believed that while CSWs were at high-risk for contracting HIV, the men who patronized them were not. Research also found a strong link between high-risk behavior and alcohol consumption.

Based on research, PSI/India designed a campaign focused on the group most at risk—urban men ages 18-34 in lower socio-economic groups. Review of existing research revealed a strong prevalence toward high-risk attitudes and situations among this group, including the frequenting of CSWs.

### **The Campaign and its Objectives**

The bedrock of the campaign was the principle that people can learn by observing the behavior of others, in which an “alter ego” in the form of Balbir Pasha was created to communicate risk awareness, serve as a behavioral model to an often misinformed populace and dispel many of the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS. The campaign is part of PSI/India’s “Operation Lighthouse,” an HIV/AIDS prevention project in 12 major port communities of India funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) through PSI’s AIDSMark project.

Due to the large size of the high-risk target group, mass media—especially billboard advertising concentrated in specific geographic areas—was deemed the most efficient tool for reaching these people. PSI/India’s campaign was designed to meet the following objectives:



In this scene from a television commercial, two workers ask, “Will Balbir Pasha Get AIDS?” and raise the subject of condom use with regular partners. Young, urban men from lower socio-economic groups, who are most at risk, were targeted in the Balbir Pasha HIV/AIDS prevention campaign.

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- To increase perception of HIV/AIDS risk from unprotected sex with non-regular partners by personalizing the message and creating empathy through identifiable real-life situations.
- To generate discussion about HIV/AIDS among the target populations and opinion leaders.
- To motivate people to access HIV/AIDS hotlines and voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) services.

During the campaign's four months (November 2002-February 2003), viewers encountered people speculating on Balbir's future in a series of scenarios that reflected real-life situations. After being launched with an initial teaser, the campaign unfolded and addressed three different themes:

- The Alcohol Connection — "I often use condoms, but when I get drunk, I sometimes forget to use them." (Dec. 1-Dec. 20, 2002)
- Regular Partner Issue — "I only have sex with one person (sex worker or casual partner) and hence I am safe." (Dec. 21, 2002-Jan. 10, 2003)
- Asymptomatic Carrier Issue — "If a person looks healthy he/she must be safe from HIV/AIDS" (Jan. 11-Jan. 31, 2003)

In order to ensure acceptability and comprehension of the messages' tone and content, PSI/India conducted thorough pre-campaign testing.

Print ads, radio and television commercials and, most visibly, outdoor communication carried Balbir Pasha to locales and situations most frequently visited by the target group. Posters and billboards were plastered at bus stops, train stations, cinema halls and throughout the red light district. Interpersonal communication work, telephone hotline promotion and VCT services were endorsed on the ground to ensure saturation of behavior change messages from all possible angles.

### Significant Consumer Impact

PSI commissioned an independent research agency to conduct a post-campaign impact evaluation study with 1,500 people that showed the campaign messages were well received and effective:

- A quarter of all respondents recalled the Balbir Pasha campaign spontaneously, 62% recalled it after hearing "HIV/AIDS" and 90% remembered it after hearing "Balbir Pasha."
- Calls to PSI's *Saadhan* HIV/AIDS hotline jumped 250% and the types of queries changed from superficial to more substantive.
- More than a quarter of the participants knew the name of the hotline and over 75% believed that calling it would provide accurate and complete information.

- Retail sales of condoms in the red light district tripled after the launch of the campaign.
- The proportion of the target audience that has sex with CSWs that feels at high-risk for HIV in unprotected sex with a non-commercial partner increased from 17% to 43%.
- An increasing proportion believed that using condoms all the time reduces HIV/AIDS risk considerably (from 80% to 86%).
- An increasing proportion realized using condoms half the time did not reduce risk at all (from 43% to 53%).
- Respondents showed an increase in risk perception regarding healthy looking and more expensive CSWs and an increase in claims of condom use with CSWs.

In an article entitled "Hats off to the Balbir Pasha Campaign," the national newspaper *Indian Express* quoted theatre and advertising personality Rahul Da Cunha as saying, "I think this is one of the few AIDS campaigns that has really been successful since it has talked to a whole strata of people, without sounding alien."

### Some Criticized the Campaign

The Balbir Pasha campaign met with some criticism by groups insisting the campaign is confusing. However, pre-campaign evaluations specifically designed to test for comprehension demonstrated that test subjects could easily understand the campaign's intended messages. In an article in *The Times of India*, Varda Pendse, a working woman and mother of two, praised the campaign: "It made us sit up and take note of AIDS. It spoke to people in a language they understand. We cannot have a westernized campaign to spread awareness among the masses."

Some critics called the campaign sexist because it implied that HIV was spread primarily from women to men. But this was because the campaign was targeted at men who frequented CSWs. PSI/India chose the group at highest risk, in this case urban men, because it believes that men can play a much stronger role in reducing the epidemic and that no single campaign can successfully address all groups. Future PSI/India campaigns will target other groups with different messages.

### The Creation of an Icon

One of the most striking aspects of the campaign was its assimilation into pop culture. Amul, one of India's leading dairy cooperatives mimicked the idea of a "regular partner" in a billboard advertisement which featured the caption, "Who does Balbir Pasha wake up with every morning? Amul Butter. Regular Item." According to the January 14, 2003 issue of Mumbai's *Economic Times*, "to qualify for an execution in Amul's long-standing series of satirical topical ads, a campaign must have really made it into the city's everyday talk." This and other spin-offs and parodies truly represent Balbir Pasha as a cultural icon.

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#### PSI's Core Values:

Bottom Line Health Impact • Private Sector Speed and Efficiency •  
Decentralization, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship • Long-term Commitment to the People We Serve