

## **A report on Tabassum Barnagarwala's work**

Tabassum Barnagarwala joined *Scroll* as a health reporter in August 2021. In the past two years, she has produced an impressive body of work that spans a range of subjects, from the failure of India's drug regulatory system, to flaws in its digital health mission, to the continuing health impacts of poverty and deprivation. Alongside indepth reportage on the public health system, Tabassum has also covered growing anti-Muslim violence in India. She is an enterprising, hard working, meticulous reporter who exemplifies the best values of independent, public spirited journalism in a country where most of the news media blindly toes the government line.

Here is a summary of her work.

### **Drug regulation**

After children in The Gambia and Uzbekistan died after consuming India-made drugs, Tabassum has done several reports on the poor record of Indian pharmaceutical companies when it comes to drug safety.

She found that the [firm linked to Gambia deaths](#) had failed to meet standards for other drugs four times in India in a single year. She revisited an old episode from 1986, in which 14 people died after being administered adulterated glycerine in [Mumbai's JJ Hospital](#), and found the case against the commercial entities involved was still to conclude.

She investigated the [deadly blind spot](#) in India's cough syrup testing regime that allows pharma companies to cut corners in checking for the toxic diethylene glycol – with impunity.

Accessing a report of the US Food and Drug Administration, she broke the story about a series of [violations in the manufacturing process](#) and sterilisation methods adopted by Global Pharma, the Indian manufacturer of an eye drop that has been linked to [68 cases](#) of eye infection in America, including eight cases of vision loss and three deaths.

In February, the World Health Organisation raised a medical alert about Indian manufacturer Galentic Pharma over quality defects in several batches of its eye medicine. But as a [carefully reported story](#) by Tabassum detailed, in sharp contrast to the action taken by global organisations, Indian authorities only suspended production of the ointment for 25 days.

The inaction of Indian regulators was further underlined in another report by Tabassum. Sri Lankan authorities confirmed that three months after they had flagged infections in at least 50 patients linked to an eye drop made in Gujarat, they were [yet to receive a response from Indian drug regulators](#). Sri Lanka, meanwhile, had stopped procuring the eye drop made by Indiana Ophthalmics.

### **Digital health mission**

In an in-depth article published in August 2022, Tabassum highlighted the surreptitious way in which the Indian government was creating [digital health accounts](#) of its citizens without their knowledge. Over 170 million health account numbers had been generated through CoWIN and the government's insurance scheme by then. Months later, she reported on the [cyberattack on AIIMS](#) in Delhi, which exposed the vulnerabilities of health systems amid India's mega-push to digitise health records.

### **Covid-19**

After the deadly second wave of Covid-19 had subsided, Tabassum took stock of India's preparedness for future waves. In a report published in August 2021, she pointed out that [40% of India's districts still did not have an RT-PCR testing lab](#). In an investigative story in September, she debunked [Bihar's exaggerated claims of record vaccination numbers](#) on the prime minister's birthday. She refocused attention on the [oxygen crisis](#) that the country had witnessed at the peak of the second wave through [a special series of stories](#). She reported on the Indian government's [botched-up policy on syringes](#). She also wrote about the impact of [long Covid in rural India](#), the confusion in Covid-19 [vaccination centres](#), and the [flaws in India's vaccine pricing policy](#).

In March 2022, two years after India first locked down to contain the spread of Covid-19, Tabassum wrote about the hidden cost of the pandemic. She documented the spate of [suicides among working class Indians](#) who lost jobs and incomes, as well as the [failure of the Modi government's health insurance scheme](#) in cushioning the financial costs of Covid-19 treatment.

In a poignant piece published in Scroll's Common Ground section, Tabassum wrote about [the pandemic's orphans](#). The government had announced financial assistance for children who had lost their parents to Covid-19, but Tabassum found that it was poorly designed and stuck in red tape.

Using the Right to Information, Tabassum found that more than 89,000 Indians had suffered [adverse reactions after taking Covid-19 vaccines](#), and 1,148 of them had died. Her in-depth report, also published in the Common Ground section, laid bare how the government's inefficient response had left families without information or support. The story was cited in a petition filed by the families in the Supreme Court.

### **Organ transplants**

In another in-depth report for Common Ground, Tabassum reported on how [India's organ transplant system is skewed against the poor](#). While government hospitals perform poorly when it comes to identifying potential donors, private hospitals charge astronomical fees for transplants.

### **Dengue and Zika**

In November 2021, Tabassum travelled to Uttar Pradesh to report on how delayed mosquito-control measures had laid the ground for [an outbreak of Zika](#). Building on

her reporting in the state, she went on to produce an in-depth piece on why India was seeing [a massive rise in mosquito-borne diseases like dengue](#).

### **Mass eye camps and blindness**

In [a long-form piece](#), Tabassum investigated what went wrong in a cataract surgery camp in Bihar that left 17 people blind in one eye. Using Right to Information requests, she found that in the past 15 years, [over 500 people had lost their sight](#) after getting treated at mass eye camps that are funded by the government. Through painstaking work, her story laid bare the recurring problems that afflicted the government programme that aims to reduce blindness in India.

### **Fire safety**

In another investigative story about recent [fire tragedies in Indian hospitals](#), Tabassum used Right to Information requests to reveal a shocking fact: some of India's top government hospitals lack basic fire safety certification. The problem is even more acute down the line. District hospitals are veritable fire traps, waiting for tragedy to happen.

### **HIV drugs shortage**

In July 2022, Tabassum did a two-part series on the acute shortage of Dolutegravir and other life-saving drugs for HIV-AIDs patients. These were the first reports in the national media to put the spotlight on the problem. In the [first](#) part, Tabassum reported that government-run antiretroviral centres had stopped supply of the drugs or moved patients to a different drug regimen. In the [second](#) part, she explained why an abrupt change in medication could endanger the lives of patients. The reports became part of protest letters and petitions filed by the patients.

### **Cholera**

After several people died in a [cholera outbreak](#) in Amravati district in eastern Maharashtra, Tabassum investigated the underlying causes and found a larger pattern: despite the Modi government building a record number of toilets and tap-water connections, many simply weren't working.

### **Drug resistance**

Should India fight leprosy with an antibiotic that might lead to TB drug resistance? Tabassum reported on the concerns surrounding the use of rifampicin as a [preventive medicine for leprosy](#). The drug is also used to treat tuberculosis, which affects lakhs of people in India every year.

### **Malnutrition**

Tabassum travelled to Adivasi villages in Nandurbar, the Maharashtra district with among the highest child malnutrition rates, to document how Aadhaar was depriving mothers of crucial [maternity assistance](#). She also found that government nutrition centres are showing dismal results in helping malnourished children. Less than half the malnourished children admitted

at the district's [nutrition rehabilitation centres](#) since 2021 had gained the targeted weight.

### **Medical device industry**

Tabassum reported on why India's efforts to boost its medical devices industry were falling short. While large companies had benefited from the central government's [production-linked incentives scheme](#), small manufacturers said they were still struggling.

### **Drug patents**

A report documents how dogged and painstaking advocacy by HIV patients led the authorities to reject a patent application for [bedaquiline](#), a drug that shortens treatment and has a higher success rate.

### **Abortion rights**

Despite the law in India allowing abortions up to 24 weeks of pregnancy in certain cases, Indian women [struggle to access abortions](#) because of legal and medical procedures, Tabassum reported.

### **Heat waves**

After 13 people died of heatstroke after prolonged exposure to the sun at an event organised by Maharashtra government, Tabassum reported on the [absence of effective heat action plans](#) in India, and [interviewed an expert](#).

### **Indian medical students**

Tabassum closely followed the [harrowing plight of Indian medical students stuck in war-torn Ukraine](#). She also wrote about [the anxiety of students unable to return to their universities in China](#).