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Early childhood education: Stepping stone for a new India

To provide universal access to quality education from an early age, the Government launched initiatives like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Samagra Shiksha scheme and recently the Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARS).

Written by **Guest**

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Students in rural parts of the country have great potential and just need a fair start in education. (Image – Unsplash)

By **Priya Agarwal Hebbar**

Quality early childhood education is the cornerstone in shaping a child's future. As 85 per cent of a child's brain develops during the first six years after the birth, early childhood education along with good health and nutrition at the early age is paramount to lay the foundation for sound physiological and mental growth. According to UNICEF, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes facilitate children's social, emotional, nutritional, and health development. Lack of focus on early childhood development can not only limit their future but also deprive the country of its human potential.

Today as we mark the birth anniversary of India's first Education Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, his vision for free primary education for all children still holds relevance in today's India. It was under his leadership that the then Union Ministry of Education had decided to impart compulsory and free education to every child aged 6 — 14 years without any discrimination, laying the foundation to the incredible task of uprooting illiteracy in India.

To provide universal access to quality education from an early age, the Government launched initiatives like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Samagra Shiksha scheme and recently the Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARS). These programs have significantly improved the numbers and quality of education in pre-primary schools. The National Education Policy 2020 by the Government of India also proposes to universalise early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children ages 3 to 6 by 2030. This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set up by the United Nations (UN) focused on ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education of at least one year so that they are ready for primary education.

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However, there are still several issues that need to be addressed to reach the desired goals. This includes reducing the student-teacher ratio gap, improving the infrastructure, increasing awareness related to the importance of early education among the rural masses, and capacity building of the teachers. India spends only around 0.1% of GDP on ECE as compared to 0.7% of GDP spent by most developed nations. The student-teacher ratio in India is around 40:1 as compared to 11:1 in Finland that ranks highest in the quality of early childhood education.

Students in rural parts of the country have great potential and just need a fair start in education. One of the tasks ahead of us would be to set up more well-equipped preschools and improve the conditions of the existing Anganwadi centres by improving their infrastructure and upskilling their workers & helpers. Most importantly, the teaching pedagogy should be at par with the global standards to ensure that all kids get access to the same quality of education. To achieve this objective, technology can be of great help. Moreover, to deliver a robust ECE system to them, the government and the private sectors must come together.

Digitalisation enables a larger rural footprint and can play a key role in improving the early childhood education system in the country as was demonstrated during the pandemic. Technology helps children learn easily and opens a world of creative teaching & learning techniques. With its help, the anganwadis can make learning more engaging for students. The NEP also acknowledges the importance of digital learning as an alternative to the conventional classroom mode.

Supporting the government policies, several corporate giants, and non-profit organisations under their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) endeavours and philanthropic initiatives are coming together to work to make quality pre-primary education accessible to all. From setting up standalone educational centres for pre-primary kids to providing access to technology for promoting digital learning in the rustic areas of the country, corporate houses are playing an essential role in bridging the education gaps. Apart from this, they are also educating the parents and communities about the importance of early childhood education. Through various initiatives, most corporate houses are now steering rural India towards a better and brighter future.

With this thought, we conceived Project Nand Ghar, a network of modern anganwadis providing a set of integrated services with the vision to transform ECE for rural children through state-of-the-art infrastructure powered by solar, high quality pre-primary education imparted via e-learning. With its technology driven model supported by best-in-class services, Nand Ghar identifies itself not only as a new-age anganwadi centre but a centre of pride for the community members encouraging community integration, ownership and participation on ground.

To address and fundamentally strengthen the services for nutrition and early childhood education, the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development made a strategic move towards integrating Saksham Anganwadi & POSHAN 2.0. The proposed 2 Lakh Saksham Anganwadis would be next generation anganwadi centres equipped with better infrastructure, audio visual aids and clean energy sources. This development shall further pave a way for disruptive change at the large scale.

With the collaborative efforts of the government and private sector, several parts of the country have witnessed a gradual rise in early childhood development and education. To achieve the goals laid down under NEP 2020, more and more corporates must join forces for the common goal of bolstering the education ecosystem in a way that no child remains deprived of their right to quality education!

(The author is Non-Executive Director, Vedanta Ltd. Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position or policy of the FinancialExpress.com.)

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