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ET COMMENTARY

Gen Viksit needs to start young



Synopsis

India focuses on early childhood development through Anganwadis. These centers aim to nurture future workforce. Government initiatives support health, nutrition, and childcare. Empowering Anganwadi workers is crucial for quality outcomes. Universal childcare can boost female participation and household incomes. Projects like Tata Trusts' show the potential of strengthened systems. Technology and effective programs can improve learning outcomes.

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Sep 19, 2025, 10:39:00 PM IST

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Research shows that 85% of a child's brain development happens before age 6, and 18 months of structured early learning can boost IQ. For India's 13.7 cr children under 6, these years will shape innovators and drivers of productivity in 2047. After 75 years focused on survival - tackling mortality, malnutrition, hunger and poverty - the next 25 must deliver growth and competitiveness. Anganwadis are at the heart of this transformation, nurturing the future workforce from the very start.

But evidence on early learning is sobering. Nearly half of Class 1 children can't read a word or recognise a number. Despite **NEP 2020**, learning poverty persists. Yet, progress offers hope - ASER 2024 finds rising **anganwadi** enrolment, signalling growing parental trust. That trust must drive transformation. GoI's **Swasth Nari Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan** and Poshan Maah are embedding health, nutrition and childcare into the system - laying foundations for stronger mothers, children and, ultimately, a stronger nation.

For decades, anganwadis were seen as mere feeding centres. They are hubs where nutrition, health and playful learning converge, led by 14 lakh workers. Mothers are children's first teachers; anganwadi workers are the second. As frontline educators and caregivers, they must be empowered with training, resources and dignity - without these, the quality of outcomes will suffer.

Expanding anganwadis into a universal system of childcare would enable higher female labour force participation, lift household incomes and strengthen human capital. At the same time, close to 9 cr children, healthy and school-ready, would become the driving force of India's future growth.

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Tata Trusts' Project Spotlight in Maharashtra, for example, provides evidence of what is possible when existing public systems are strengthened with focus and intent. Implemented across 4,100 anganwadi centres in Chandrapur, Gadchiroli and Palghar, and reaching close to 2.8 mn people, the programme was designed to reinforce ICDS. Its approach rests on three pillars: system strengthening, community mobilisation and multi-level advocacy.

Anganwadis were refurbished and equipped. Frontline workers, including anganwadi workers, ASHAs and ANMs, were trained in nutrition and growth monitoring, and large-scale public campaigns engaged families on breastfeeding, dietary diversity and caregiving practices. Between 2019 and 2021, dietary diversity among mother-child pairs in intervention areas increased from 10% to 25%, while poor diversity declined significantly.

Technology, too, can accelerate transformation when designed around people. Founded in 2020, **Rocket Learning**, a non-profit dedicated to improving **early childhood education** for underprivileged kids, has reached more than 40 lakh children and worked with three lakh anganwadi workers. Its model combines digital nudges with behaviour change. Daily activities sent on WhatsApp guide parents to engage their children in play-based learning using household materials.

An independent evaluation in Amravati, Maharashtra, found Rocket Learning's intervention improved mathematics skills by 0.217 standard deviations and language skills by 0.154 standard deviations, at a cost of just over \$1 per child. Parents report higher confidence, children arrive at Class 1 better prepared, and anganwadi workers gain recognition as educators. This is tech deployed not for substitution but for support, amplifying human relationships among caregivers, children and educators.

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Pratham's Teaching at Right Level (TaRL) has established that even the weakest learning foundations can be rebuilt - and at scale. Independent evaluations confirm that Pratham's Read India programme recorded a 51% increase in reading ability among children in Classes 3-5, alongside large gains in addition and subtraction. The efficacy of the programme, validated by Nobel Prize-winning research in development economics, shows the power of simple, scalable pedagogy when embedded into state systems.

These models demonstrate that India is not short of solutions. The challenge is urgency and resolve.

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Today, investment in children aged 3-5 years is less than 20% of what we invest in children in middle and senior school. We must start investing more in the anganwadi system, where the potential of children is shaped for the rest of their lives. If we succeed, this Viksit Bharat generation will be the most capable in our history.

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