

Why anganwadis need urgent re-imagining

Becoming a developed country by 2047 calls for a National Mission on Early Childhood Development, Care and Education, to invest in the future of children today

Published on: Dec 25, 2025 8:56 PM IST

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When we imagine India in 2047, we visualise a modern nation with skyscrapers, highways and a robust economy — a Viksit Bharat. But what lies at the core of this robust economy is not just its infrastructure, but also an economy fuelled by qualified young professionals at every level, working together to make India a \$40-trillion economy.



As incomes rise and women enter the workforce, the demand has expanded from supplementary nutrition to high-quality childcare. (HT Archive)

It lies in the minds we shape today.

Economically, the case is clear. Studies show that every rupee invested yields a 13-rupee return in higher future earnings. In moral terms, the case is even clearer: A child's potential should never be determined by the place of their birth or the income of their parents.

Over the past five decades, India has quietly built one of the largest childcare infrastructures in the world, consisting of more than 25 lakh anganwadi workers and helpers. This is a workforce as large as the Army and Railways combined and caters to over 10 crore mothers and children under six. By reimagining the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme-Anganwadi system, we can transform it into the world's most powerful platform for human capital creation.

Most people still see anganwadis as primarily "porridge centres". While providing adequate nutrition is an important part of the system, it is not the system itself. India both needs and deserves more. As incomes rise and women enter the workforce, the demand has expanded from supplementary nutrition to high-quality childcare and early education. Parents want safe spaces for their children to learn and play, thereby also providing opportunities for mothers to work full days.

But the reality is sobering. Currently, nearly one crore children aged three to six are not enrolled anywhere. Many of them reach Class 1 unable to recognise even a single letter or number. By then, their lifelong learning outcomes are compromised — as is the vision of a Viksit Bharat.

The anganwadi system already has the reach; now, we must build its capacity. It is time to reimagine it as a 'Bhavishya Bhavan' — "creator of the future" in a literal sense — and transform this vast network into a vibrant, comprehensive ecosystem for early childhood development and care.

We propose a National Mission on Early Childhood Development, Care and Education (ECDCE) that would include upgrading anganwadi centres into vibrant, full-day childcare and learning hubs; rebranding and re-training workers as early educators and advisors; and giving them the tools and recognition they need. Instead of operating for four hours a day, these centres would operate seven hours and offer holistic development for young children.

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Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi and introducing the national curriculums Navchetana and Aadharshila full of simple play-based activities.

ECDCE delivers what economists call a “triple dividend” — one that benefits women, children, and the economy all at once.

First, it restores dignity and aspiration to the 25 lakh women who power this system. Upgrading their skills, linking pay to performance, providing full-day working hours, and giving them formal recognition as educators can unlock enormous energy at the grassroots.

Second, it ensures that every child — regardless of family income or geography — gets a strong foundation for life. The science is clear: Early stimulation and learning shape a child’s IQ, emotional regulation, and social skills.

Third, it strengthens the care economy. When reliable childcare exists, women can work, households earn more, and communities prosper. Nations that have built strong childcare systems — from Sweden to South Korea — also have more inclusive, resilient economies.

For decades, India’s early childhood programme has been in survival mode, focused on tackling malnutrition and child mortality. These efforts have saved millions of lives. But beyond survival, we need to ensure that our children also thrive — developing their cognitive, social, and emotional skills to be school- and life-ready.

On the hardware side, India must invest in child-friendly, vibrant and inclusive spaces such as handicapped-friendly classrooms, outdoor playgrounds and play facilities along with uniforms. Classrooms need to be print rich with Learning Materials and Indigenous Toys. Anganwadi centres should provide joyful learning environments that spark curiosity and imagination.

On the software side, the next step is to provide continuous coaching and mentoring for anganwadi educators and parents, supported by technology platforms such as WhatsApp and the Poshan Tracker that enable e-learning and real-time monitoring.

Beyond infrastructure and curriculum, the success of this mission will depend on trust between parents, educators, and the community. Parents must believe that their local anganwadi is a safe, caring, high-quality place for their child. Communities must see these centres as local institutions of pride.

awareness. The message must be simple: Enrolling your child early is as important as getting them vaccinated, and daily stimulation is as important as daily meals. Like Telangana and Haryana, we can combine these reform measures with a rebranding of AWCs to revitalise the system and bring in new energy.

Given its transformative potential, the ECDCE Mission deserves to be treated as a national priority headed by the Prime Minister and anchored by MWCD. Only a whole-of-government approach cutting across health, education, nutrition, and labour can do it full justice. The Viksit Bharat generation is already here. The question is: will we give them the foundation they deserve?

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