



Maximising India's Demographic Dividend: Investing in the Early Years

India's demographic dividend depends on the capabilities developed during early childhood. Investing in health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, stimulation and quality early learning can strengthen human capital and foundational learning. With Navchetana, Aadharshila, stronger Anganwadi services, community participation and evidence-based State interventions, India can build stronger foundations for Viksit Bharat.

India's demographic advantage is often discussed in terms of the size of its young and working-age population. But a large young population becomes an economic advantage only when children grow up healthy, well-nourished, confident and ready to learn. The foundations for this are laid much before a child enters school.

A child who does not receive adequate nutrition, stimulation, responsive care or opportunities to learn in the early years may begin formal schooling at a disadvantage. These early gaps can influence subsequent learning, school progression, skills, and eventually, productivity. Investing in early childhood development (ECD) is therefore not simply a social-sector priority; it is an investment in India's human capital.

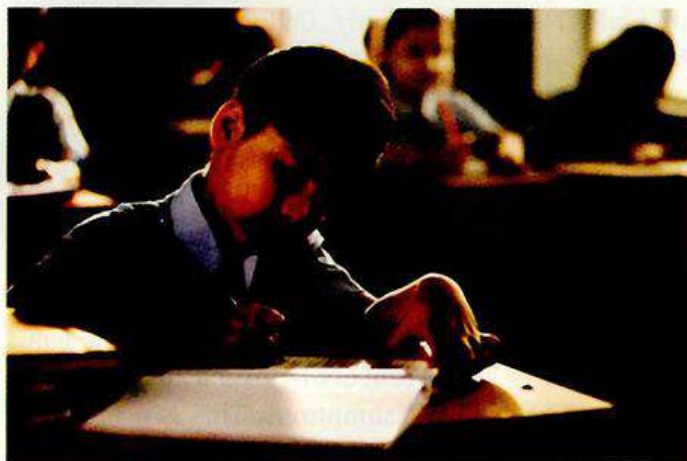
The first six years of life are a particularly important period. During these years, children develop rapidly across cognitive, language, physical and socio-emotional domains. Their development is shaped not only by what happens in an Anganwadi centre or a preschool, but also by what happens at home, how they are fed, spoken to, played with, comforted and encouraged to explore. Health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, protection, stimulation and early learning therefore need to be viewed as parts of one continuum.

India has made important progress in maternal and child health and nutrition. The National Family Health Survey-6 (NFHS-6), covering 2023-24, reports that institutional deliveries increased from 88.6 per cent in NFHS-5 to 90.6 per cent. Full immunisation among children aged 12-23 months increased from 83.8 per cent to 87.1 per cent, while the proportion of children breastfed within one hour of birth increased from 41.8 per cent to 50.1 per cent. Stunting among children under five years declined from 35.5 per cent to 29.3 per cent. These improvements provide a stronger foundation for children's development, even as continued efforts are required to address undernutrition and ensure quality services for every child.

The scale of India's education system makes the quality of these early foundations even more important. Unified District Information System for Education



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Plus (UDISE+) 2024–25 records 24.69 crore students enrolled in school education. Yet learning assessments continue to point to gaps that need attention. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 recorded average Mathematics scores of 57 per cent in Grade 3, 44 per cent in Grade 5, 36 per cent in Grade 8 and 32 per cent in Grade 10. These figures should not be read as a direct measure of learning loss among the same cohort of children, but they underline the importance of strengthening learning foundations from the earliest years.

More recent assessments provide additional evidence. PARAKH *Rashtriya Sarvekshan* 2024 assessed more than 21 lakh students across Grades 3, 6, and 9 in all 36 States and UTs. ASER 2024 reported that the proportion of children in rural India who could read a Grade 2-level text by Grade 3 had increased from 16.3 per cent in 2022 to 23.4 per cent in 2024. The improvement is encouraging, but the remaining gap makes clear that foundational learning requires sustained attention.

The national policy framework is increasingly responding to this continuum. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has developed *Navchetana*, the National Framework for Early Childhood Stimulation for Children from Birth to Three Years, and *Aadharshila*, the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education for Children from Three to Six Years. Together, these frameworks provide a basis for strengthening early stimulation, play, interaction and learning through the Anganwadi system.

The 0–3 age group deserves particular attention. During these years, much of a child’s learning takes place through everyday interactions with caregivers. Talking, responding, singing, playing, and sharing attention with a child may appear simple, but such “serve-and-return” interactions contribute to

language, emotional security, social development and self-regulation.

This is where the family becomes an important partner in ECD. Home visits and caregiver meetings can help parents and other caregivers understand how ordinary activities, feeding, bathing, talking, playing or looking at picture books, can become opportunities for learning and development. Experiences such as Maharashtra’s *Aarambh* and Odisha’s *Aama Kuni Pila* illustrate how home-based engagement can be integrated with the Anganwadi system. Such approaches should continue to be evaluated so that effective practices can be adapted and taken to scale.

For many families, especially where mothers and other caregivers are engaged in work, access to safe and quality crèche services is equally important. A good crèche is more than a place where a child is kept while parents work. It can provide nutrition, care, play, stimulation and a safe environment for young children. Haryana’s State Creche Policy-2022 and Karnataka’s *Koosina Mane* model illustrate different approaches to expanding such services. Their experience can inform further efforts to improve availability, quality and standards.

For children aged three to six years, early learning should remain play-based, age-appropriate and rooted in children’s language and surroundings. The objective is not to bring formal schooling down to younger ages, but to help children develop communication, early numeracy, motor skills, curiosity, problem-solving and the ability to interact with others. The Anganwadi Worker has a central role in creating this environment, supported by appropriate training, materials, and regular engagement with parents.

Technology can support these efforts, particularly in training frontline workers, sharing activity ideas, communicating with parents and monitoring services. But technology should remain an enabler. It cannot substitute for the warmth of a caregiver, the responsiveness of an Anganwadi Worker or the interaction between children. Where digital or artificial-intelligence-based tools are used for developmental screening or monitoring, human oversight, appropriate safeguards, and clear referral mechanisms are essential.

Developmental monitoring can help identify children who may require additional support. Several States have experimented with digital tools and structured assessments for this purpose. These experiences are useful, but the emphasis should remain on timely support rather than simply generating data. A



developmental assessment is meaningful only when it leads to appropriate guidance, referral or intervention.

The wider community also has a role. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Days, Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committees, Self-Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Mothers' Groups and youth groups can help create greater awareness around child development. Storytelling, toy-making, local games, reading activities and community events can make early learning a shared responsibility. Communication in local languages can help families understand the importance of responsive caregiving, appropriate feeding, play, fathers' and other caregivers' participation, and early identification of developmental concerns.

States and UTs will remain central to translating these ideas into outcomes. Three areas deserve particular attention: bringing departments together around the child, evaluating promising interventions rigorously, and taking evidence-based approaches

to scale. Meghalaya's Early Childhood Development Mission, for example, illustrates how health, nutrition, early learning and caregiving can be brought together through a coordinated approach.

There is also a strong economic rationale for investing early. The Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister's report on foundational literacy and numeracy estimated that effective investment in foundational learning could generate economic gains equivalent to 7.39 per cent of GDP over a 20-year period under its modelling assumptions. This is a modelled estimate, not a forecast of an actual future increase in GDP.

India's demographic dividend will ultimately depend not only on how many young people the country has, but on what capabilities they acquire. A child who is healthy, well-nourished, secure and curious is better placed to learn. A child who learns well is better placed to acquire skills. And a generation with stronger capabilities is better placed to contribute to India's economic and social progress.

The journey towards *Viksit Bharat* therefore begins much earlier than the workplace. It begins in the first years of life, in the home, in the community and at the Anganwadi centre. Strengthening these foundations is one of the most important investments India can make in the human capital of the future. □

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