
REIMAGINING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF ANGANWADI CENTRES UNDER THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP 2020) considers Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the basis of lifelong learning and the core of India's educational reforms in the form of Anganwadi centers. Historically linked to the provision of nutrition, vaccination and welfare activities for children through the ICDS program, Anganwadi centers have been given the further task of imparting good quality pre-primary education. In this context, the present research attempts to study the changing role of Anganwadi centers in the implementation of NEP 2020. This research intends to examine the legal and policy provisions related to Anganwadi centers under NEP 2020, the contribution of these centers in ECCE, and the problems faced by them in their operation. This research seeks to address the question: To what extent are Anganwadi centers adequately prepared to perform their enhanced educational functions in accordance with the National Education Policy, 2020? This research employs the doctrinal approach through the analysis of the primary sources such as National Education Policy, 2020, ICDS scheme and policy documents among others along with the secondary sources like books, journals and other scholarly papers. The research reveals that even though the National Education Policy, 2020 has greatly increased the educational roles and responsibilities of Anganwadi centres and has recognized their significance in achieving the objectives of early childhood education, there are still some challenges that are hindering the working of Anganwadi centres because of lack of proper infrastructure, inadequate training and limited resources among other issues. It can be said that increasing the institutional capacity, infrastructure and training of Anganwadi workers is vital for fulfilling the objectives of the NEP, 2020.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE); Anganwadi Centres; National Education Policy, 2020 (NEP 2020); Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); Pre-primary Education.

I. Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has become an essential part of the education policy because of its immense importance in the development of the child in the realms of cognition, emotion, and society.¹ Acknowledging the fact that more than eighty-five per cent of the development of the brain happens till the age of six years, National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) recognises ECCE as the basis for all future learning and has integrated ECCE into the system using the 5+3+3+4 model.² Anganwadi centres (AWCs) in India that are set up under the ICDS scheme have offered nutrition, immunisation, healthcare, and pre-school non-formal education to children who are less than six years old.³ NEP 2020 has taken upon itself to extend the mandate of Anganwadi's by making them play a very significant role in foundational literacy and numeracy and universal pre-primary education.⁴ The extant literature points out the relevance of ECCE in achieving holistic development of children and the crucial part played by Anganwadi centers in achieving the goals set forth in NEP 2020.⁵ The international bodies like UNESCO and UNICEF have underscored the significance of inclusive and accessible early childhood education to achieve desired developmental results in the long run.⁶ The government documents, policies, and academic studies have reviewed the incorporation of ECCE in the formal education system, pedagogical changes brought about by the policy, and capacity-building of Anganwadi workers.⁷ Nevertheless, the majority of the available literature revolves around policy intentions and theoretical speculations. Very few studies have been carried out regarding the organisational ability of Anganwadi centres to fulfil their extended education roles in the wake of NEP 2020. This requires a thorough evaluation of the evolving role of Anganwadis in India's education sector.

In this context, the present study aims to conduct an examination of the laws and policies relating to the functioning of Anganwadis in the National Education Policy, 2020, determine

¹ James J. Heckman, Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children, 312 SCIENCE 1900, 1900–02 (2006).

² Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 ¶¶ 1.1–1.3 (2020).

³ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), <https://icds-wcd.nic.in>.

⁴ NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, supra note 2, ¶¶ 1.4–1.6.

⁵ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION POLICY 1–5 (2013).

⁶ UNESCO, RIGHT FROM THE START: BUILD INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES THROUGH INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION 9–12 (2022); UNICEF, EARLY MOMENTS MATTER FOR EVERY CHILD 18–24 (2017).

⁷ PRS Legislative Research, National Education Policy, 2020: Key Features (Aug. 7, 2020).

their role in the provision of Early Childhood Care and Education, highlight the infrastructure, administration, and institutional problems related to the implementation of NEP 2020, and provide ways through which they can be enhanced to contribute to the success of foundational learning. The study poses the following research question: to what extent do Anganwadis have the capability to undertake the additional educational responsibilities that come with the National Education Policy, 2020? In order to answer the above research question, the present study utilizes a doctrinal research approach through the examination of primary and secondary sources.⁸ Primary sources comprise the National Education Policy, 2020, Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, National ECCE Policy, various notifications, and reports released by the Ministries of Education and Women and Child Development. Peer-reviewed books, journals, policies, and studies from NITI Aayog and PRS Legislative Research make up secondary sources.⁹

II. Early Childhood Care and Education and the Evolution of Anganwadi Centres

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is the basis of human development, encompassing the physical, cognitive, emotional, language, and social development of the child until he or she reaches age 8.¹⁰ Studies in developmental psychology have shown that there is a strong effect of the early childhood experiences on the person's educational success, health and socio-economic status in the future.¹¹ Understanding the significance of this critical period of human development, India launched the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme in 1975.¹² Supplementary feeding, immunization, health screening, referrals, nutritional education, and non-formal pre-school education are some of the services provided at the anganwadi centers.¹³ The National Education Policy 2020 is a radical departure from past policies since it incorporates the concept of ECCE into the formal system of education under the foundational stage of the 5+3+3+4 system.¹⁴ This means that anganwadis are not considered simply welfare centers but also educational institutions preparing children for formal education.

⁸ NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2.

⁹ NITI Aayog, STRATEGY FOR NEW INDIA @ 75, at 84–87 (2018).

¹⁰ OECD, STARTING STRONG 2017: KEY OECD INDICATORS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE 23–29 (2017).

¹¹ Heckman, *supra* note 1.

¹² Ministry of Women & Child Development, *supra* note 3.

¹³ *Id*

¹⁴ NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2, ¶¶ 1.5–1.9.

III. The Role of Anganwadi Centres under the National Education Policy, 2020

A. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Amongst the major goals of NEP 2020 is the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy amongst all children.¹⁵ It has been realized through the policy that the lack of acquiring basic reading and writing skills in early childhood can have adverse impacts on education in the long run.¹⁶ In this regard, the responsibility of creating a conducive atmosphere for early learning has been vested upon Anganwadi centres. The NEP 2020 recommends a learning process that is play-based, experience-based, and activity-based rather than mere rote learning.¹⁷ The use of storytelling, music, riddles, arts, and other interactive activities are supposed to enhance cognitive skills as well as linguistic skills of the young learners.¹⁸ For accomplishing this purpose, the government of India initiated the NIPUN Bharat Mission.¹⁹

B. Holistic Child Development

In contrast to regular schools, Anganwadi centers take an approach that integrates education with healthcare and nutrition.²⁰ NEP 2020 recognizes the fact that educational outcomes are inseparable from the physical and emotional well-being of children.²¹ Provision of supplementary nutrition, vaccination, and health screening has greatly helped in preparing children for schools and their all-round development.²²

C. Professional Development of Anganwadi Workers

The successful implementation of NEP 2020 hinges on the skills and readiness of Anganwadi workers.²³ NEP 2020 envisions a series of certification and diploma courses for early childhood education in order to make Anganwadi workers well-versed in child psychology, pedagogical practices suited to the age of the children, basic reading and numeracy, and classroom

¹⁵Id. ¶ 2.1.

¹⁶Id.

¹⁷Id. ¶¶ 1.8–1.10.

¹⁸Ministry of Women & Child Development, *supra* note 5, at 18–21.

¹⁹Ministry of Education, Government of India, NIPUN Bharat Guidelines 9–16 (2021).

²⁰UNICEF, *supra* note 6.

²¹NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2, ¶ 1.3.

²²Ministry of Women & Child Development, *supra* note 5.

²³NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2, ¶¶ 1.12–1.15.

management.²⁴ The process of training is thus necessary for their capacity building.

D. Institutional Integration and School Readiness

Integration of institutions in the form of school complexes and clusters is encouraged under NEP 2020 to enhance collaboration between Anganwadi centers and schools.²⁵ This helps in the exchange of infrastructure facilities and educational resources and ensures smooth transition from preschooling to primary schooling.

IV. Challenges in the Implementation of NEP 2020

However, despite NEP 2020's ambitious framework, there have been certain impediments that prevent Anganwadi centres from functioning efficiently. Many such centres function in rented places which do not have proper classrooms, toilets, electricity, and teaching or learning material.²⁶ Apart from this, educational qualification gaps and lack of capacity building initiatives prevent the shift from welfare services to educational services.²⁷ Fragmented administration adds another dimension to the implementation process since ECCE is not just a matter for one institution but rather entails involvement of a number of parties, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, state governments, and local administrations.²⁸ The inclusion of additional duties in education without any improvement in salaries can be an overload for the Anganwadi workers.²⁹ There remain regional and socio-economic inequalities affecting the quality of ECCE delivery, especially in rural areas.³⁰

V. Recommendations

The implementation of the objectives of NEP 2020 would involve a comprehensive plan that focuses on the improvement of the organisational capability of Anganwadi centres. Governments must spend appropriate amounts of money on improving the infrastructure,

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Id. ¶ 1.11.

²⁶ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, ANNUAL REPORT 2024–25, at 48–55 (2025).

²⁷ PRS Legislative Research, *supra* note 7.

²⁸ NITI Aayog, *supra* note 9.

²⁹ Ministry of Women & Child Development, *supra* note 26.

³⁰ UNICEF, *supra* note 6.

which includes classrooms, toilets, playgrounds, computer facilities, and learning aids.³¹ Specialised and regular training programs can be designed to improve the pedagogy skills of Anganwadi workers.³² The institutional coordination amongst the ministries of education and women and child development can be improved through effective and integrated administrative processes.³³ The Anganwadi workers must be provided with proper salary, social status, and career prospects. In addition, there should be a monitoring and evaluation process to check the quality of the ECCE programs and find out their shortcomings.³⁴ Special emphasis must be placed on the rural and underprivileged sections of society.³⁵

VI. Conclusion

The National Education Policy, 2020, is an innovative approach to India's approach to early childhood education, considering that ECCE has been established as the base for lifelong learning, with Anganwadi centres playing a key role in educational reform.³⁶ Combining preschool education with nutritional care, health, and social welfare programs, the policy aims to support holistic child development and build strong literacy and numeracy skills.³⁷ The fulfilment of these goals requires proper preparation of Anganwadi centres as well as Anganwadi workers to handle their extended tasks. Challenges related to infrastructure, lack of training, coordination, and worker support continue to hinder successful implementation.³⁸ Although NEP 2020 is a visionary policy in terms of reform, the implementation of this policy entirely depends on governmental commitment and resource management. Thus, it can be said that improvement in the Anganwadi centres is a requirement in the context of education and social development as well. The development in ECCE and the empowerment of Anganwadi workers will ensure equity and quality in education.

³¹ OECD, *supra* note 10.

³² NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2, ¶ 1.15.

³³ *Id.* ¶ 1.11.

³⁴ NITI Aayog, *supra* note 9.

³⁵ UNICEF, *supra* note 6.

³⁶ NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020, *supra* note 2.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Ministry of Women & Child Development, *supra* note 26.

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