

Transforming Anganwadi into Centres of Early Education: A Constitutional and Policy Perspective

Dr. A. Shankar¹

¹ Department of Political Science, Veeranari Chakali Illamma Women's University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Abstract:

Anganwadi centers are crucial to India's child development strategy, operating under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme with a focus on nutrition, health, and care. Recent findings illustrate the importance of early childhood education (ECE) as the basis for a strong and inclusive educational system. This paper explores the necessity of evolving Anganwadi centers into comprehensive early education hubs, guided by constitutional and policy frameworks. It reviews relevant articles, including Articles 21A, 45, and 39(f), which highlight the State's commitment to education and holistic child development. Additionally, the study assesses policy developments, notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which identifies Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as essential for lifelong learning. The discussion emphasizes that enhancing Anganwadi centers with trained educators, better infrastructure, and child-focused teaching methods can promote educational equity, particularly for marginalized communities. Ultimately, the shift of Anganwadi centers into early education centers is argued to be both a constitutional duty and a vital policy move for nation-building and sustainable development.

Keywords: Development, Education, Nutrition, Malnutrition, Pre-primary education, Childhood

Introduction

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years of age. Early child development encompasses physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and motor development between 0-8 years of age. The early years are critical, because this is the period in life when the brain develops most rapidly and has a high capacity for change, and the foundation is laid for health and wellbeing throughout life. Nurturing care is provided in a stable environment, that is sensitive to children's health and nutritional needs, with protection from threats, opportunities for early learning, and interactions that are responsive, emotionally supportive and developmentally stimulating is at the heart of children's potential to develop¹.

Pre-primary education commonly referred to as *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)*, represents the foundational stage of the education system, addressing the developmental needs of children aged 3–6 years. This stage is widely acknowledged as a critical period for brain development, personality formation and learning readiness, with long-term implications for educational attainment and socio-economic mobility. Contemporary educational research emphasizes that investment in early childhood education yields the highest social and economic returns, particularly in developing countries like India.

In the Indian context, pre-primary education has historically evolved within a welfare-oriented framework, primarily through *Anganwadi centers established under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme (1975)*. These centers provide basic pre-school education along with nutrition, health and

immunization services, especially for children from rural, tribal and marginalized communities. Alongside this public system, a rapidly expanding private sector of nursery, kindergarten and Montessori schools caters largely to urban and semi-urban populations, resulting in significant disparities in access, quality and pedagogy².

Despite its critical importance, pre-primary education remained outside the formal and legally enforceable education structure for decades. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which guarantees education as a fundamental right, applies only to children in the 6–14 years age group, thereby excluding pre-primary education from statutory protection. This policy gap contributed to uneven standards, inadequate regulation and insufficient public investment in early childhood education³.

A paradigmatic shift occurred with the adoption of the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, which formally recognized ECCE as the first stage of the restructured 5+3+3+4 curricular framework. The policy advocates a play-based, experiential and child-centric pedagogical approach, emphasizing holistic development rather than early academic pressure. NEP 2020 further underscores the integration of Anganwadis with primary schools, professional training of ECCE educators and the development of a nationally coherent curriculum, later articulated through the *National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS), 2022*⁴.

Against this backdrop, the pre-primary education system in India occupies a *strategically significant position* in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, as envisioned under *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4)*. Strengthening this stage is crucial not only for improving learning outcomes in subsequent schooling but also for addressing broader concerns of social inequality, human capital formation and national development. Hence, a systematic analysis of the structure, policy framework and challenges of pre-primary education in India is essential for informed academic inquiry and evidence-based policy formulation⁵.

The architects of the Indian Constitution envisioned Parliament not merely as an arena for partisan debate, but as a forum enriched by knowledge, experience, and intellectual deliberation. With this intent, Article 80 of the Constitution empowers the President to nominate twelve members to the Rajya Sabha from fields such as literature, science, art, and social service. This unique provision enables the inclusion of distinguished individuals who may not seek electoral politics, yet whose expertise can meaningfully contribute to national policymaking. Free from party discipline and electoral compulsions, nominated members are better positioned to offer independent and long-term perspectives on legislative matters.

A recent and compelling illustration of this constitutional vision is provided by Sudha Murthy, a noted social reformer and writer, currently serving as a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha. During a recent parliamentary session, she introduced a Private Member's Bill addressing a critical yet neglected area of India's education system, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), particularly for children between the ages of three and six. The seriousness with which the House received her proposal reflected the relevance and urgency of the issue.

Article 21A of the Indian Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education to children aged six to fourteen years, thereby placing a constitutional obligation on the State and parents alike. However, the educational and developmental needs of children below six years of age remain outside the ambit of enforceable constitutional rights. Sudha Murthy's intervention draws attention to this significant policy and constitutional gap. She argued that the real foundation of human development is laid during early childhood and that neglecting this stage undermines the effectiveness of later educational interventions.

Linking early childhood education to India's long-term developmental vision of "Viksit Bharat 2047", she emphasized that cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, social skills, and moral values develop most rapidly between the ages of three and six. Drawing from her extensive experience in grassroots social work, she highlighted that in rural India, parents often do not prioritize early education, as formal schooling generally begins only after a child completes five or six years. Consequently, this formative phase remains largely unregulated and under-supported by the State.

Sudha Murthy proposed that Anganwadi centers currently functioning primarily as nutrition and welfare units should be transformed into comprehensive early education institutions. She advocated the introduction of a new constitutional provision, Article 21B, to make education for children aged three to six a compulsory State responsibility, analogous to Article 21A. Such a step, she argued, would institutionalize early childhood education as a right rather than a discretionary welfare measure.

Present Functions of Anganwadis

Anganwadi Centers, or AWCs, are part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in India. They are one of the country's most important and people-focused welfare programs. These centers are set up in communities and work on several important issues like nutrition, health, education, and social justice. They have become even more important because of ongoing problems like child malnutrition, learning gaps, and gender inequality. Anganwadi Centers offer Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to children aged 3 to 6 years.

This kind of education is not formal but uses play and activities to help kids learn language, social skills, and emotions. Studies show that early learning has big benefits for future success. In places where good pre-school options are not available, Anganwadis help level the playing field and stop poor backgrounds from stopping kids from learning well.

Malnutrition is a major issue in India.

Anganwadi Centers help by providing food to children under six, teenage girls, pregnant women, and new mothers. They give hot meals and food to take home to help improve health and prevent problems like being too small, too thin, or lacking important vitamins. These centers are key in helping India meet its nutrition goals and global health targets.

Anganwadis work with the public health system to provide vaccinations, deworming, and health check-ups.

They also track children's growth to spot any health issues early and help get them proper care. This helps reduce child deaths and long-term health problems. In remote areas, Anganwadi workers often serve as the first source of health advice for families.

Anganwadi Centers help mothers by giving them food, information, and support during and after pregnancy.

They also teach about breastfeeding, feeding babies, and caring for young children. This leads to better health for both mothers and babies. By focusing on mothers, these centers break the cycle of poor health and malnutrition that can be passed from one generation to the next. Anganwadi Centers are also places where women can gain knowledge and confidence. They provide education on health, family planning, and legal rights. These centers encourage women to take part in community activities, making them more visible in public life. In this way, they help promote gender equality and social inclusion. Anganwadi Centers help change how people think and act by spreading awareness about sanitation, hygiene, nutrition, child rights, and respect for all genders.

They hold meetings and visit homes to challenge harmful practices like early marriage and unfair treatment of women. Their impact comes from working closely with communities and turning policies into real-life actions. For many poor families in cities and villages, Anganwadi Centers are one of the few places they can reach for help. They show that welfare is a right, not just charity. During tough times like economic hardship or health crises, these centers offer essential support to those who need it most.

Anganwadi as Foundations of Educational Equity

Central to her proposal is the reimagining of Anganwadis as centers of structured learning. This would require the appointment of trained educators, development of age-appropriate and play-based curricula, and integration of education with health, nutrition, and emotional care. Emphasis on language development, ethical values, social behaviour, and self-reliance at this stage can significantly enhance learning outcomes in later years.

Sudha Murthy also raised concerns about growing educational inequality. Children from economically privileged backgrounds benefit from early enrolment in private pre-schools, while those dependent on government systems often begin formal learning at a disadvantage. Strengthening Anganwadis as early education centers can help bridge this gap, reduce school dropouts, and promote social mobility. In the long run, such reforms could contribute to poverty reduction and the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society.

If implemented with political will and administrative commitment, this policy shift has the potential to transform India's human capital base. It would move the nation closer not only to the ideal of "Viksit Bharat" but also towards becoming a knowledge-driven society grounded in scientific temper and social justice.

Transforming Sudha Murthy's Private Member's Bill into enforceable law would mark a significant step in addressing rural and socio-economically marginalized children's educational needs. More broadly, it reaffirms the wisdom of the Constitution's framers in enabling non-political intellectual leadership within Parliament. At a time when parliamentary proceedings are often dominated by partisan confrontation, such initiatives remind us that legislatures must also serve as spaces for visionary policymaking aimed at securing the nation's future.

Conclusion

In India, the Anganwadi system largely functions merely as a mechanism for providing food to those suffering from malnutrition. Although some centers conduct educational activities for children below the age of six, it is an undeniable fact that these programmes have not yielded results at the desired level.

The absence of adequately trained teachers in Anganwadi centers often leads to neglect in the quality of education provided to young children. As a result, early learning, which plays a crucial role in a child's overall development, does not receive the attention it deserves. To address this issue, it is essential to appoint professionally trained teachers in Anganwadi centers and strengthen these centers by integrating them more closely with the formal school education system. Such measures would greatly enhance educational opportunities for children from economically weaker sections, who largely depend on Anganwadi services for their early learning.

A nation's progress and development are closely linked to the strength of its education system. A strong and effective education system cannot be built overnight; it must rest on a solid foundation laid during early

childhood. Early childhood education shapes cognitive abilities, social skills, and moral values, which in turn influence the quality of human resources in the future. Since Anganwadi centres serve as the first point of educational exposure for millions of children, especially in rural and marginalized communities, they play a pivotal role in nation-building.

Therefore, the government must give focused attention to Anganwadi centers by improving infrastructure, ensuring the availability of trained teachers, updating teaching methods, and providing adequate learning materials. Strengthening Anganwadi centres will not only improve access to quality education for the poor but will also contribute significantly to building a strong, inclusive, and progressive education system, ultimately leading to the overall development of the country.

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