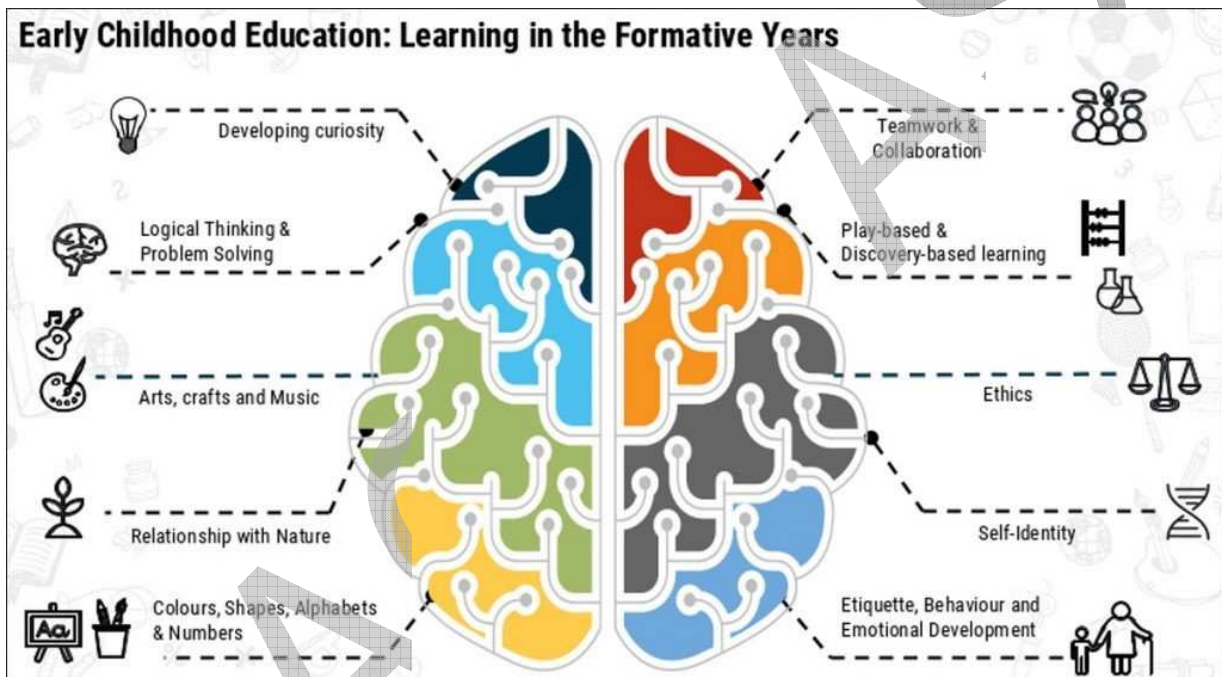




A model struggling to deliver



Introduction:

Early childhood education is education for children at early age especially between the ages of three and six.

It is commonly referred to as preschool, nursery school or simply early education. During this period, children learn the **social, emotional, physical and cognitive abilities** which are important for child development in future.

Unfortunately, in India early childhood education is not much focused. The draft National Education Policy (NEP) seeks to increase the focus on early childhood care, strengthen teacher training, and restructure the education regulatory framework.

Importance of Early Childhood Education:

Children learn every second of their lives. From using a fork and building sandcastles to **reading and socializing, proper guidance** in the form of quality early childhood education can make a big difference.

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school.

It **aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs** in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

ECCE has the possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens.

Recent government Initiatives:

1. **Evidence on Early Childhood Education (ECE)** suggests that children who engage in **early and play-based learning activities** have better developmental outcomes than those who don't.
2. **The National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework** in 2013 mandated a **'play-way'** curriculum in all Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) and preschools.
3. In 2018, the government launched the **'Transformation of Aspirational Districts'** One of the components involved capacity building, improving infrastructure, and nurturing a child-centric environment in the AWCs of these districts.
4. The **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020**, envisions universalising Early Childhood Care and Education through Anganwadis.
5. However, the advent of COVID-19 led to an abrupt halt in ECE services and progress.
6. AWCs fall under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme. Preschool education is one of the six services provided in this package.
7. AWCs are expected to provide preschool education through low-cost, locally sourced material that caters to the sociocultural context of mothers, and children below six years.
8. The infrastructure usually consists of an open space and one or two rooms to carry out activities.
9. On the other hand, private preschools usually mimic the formal schooling approach in terms of **infrastructure and learning activities**.

What are the challenges in improving ECCE?

1. Of the nearly 25 million children born in India every year, about 99% enrol in school at the age of 5 or 6.
2. However, as the report ASER 2019: 'Early Years' reveals, many children enter school without being school-ready.
3. Only 10.7% of children aged 5 could match pictures beginning with the same sound, and only 17.5% could complete a simple pictorial pattern.
4. Despite multiple actors and a variety of interventions and initiatives, achieving quality ECCE still remains a challenge.
5. According to the NEP 2020, 'Presently, quality ECCE is not available to crores of young children, particularly children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds'.
6. The current parent/caregiver mindset is 'Early years are the days for play'.
7. **NIPUN Bharat** observes that one present barrier is that the parents/caregivers do not have a role to play in education if they themselves are illiterate and their role ends at sending the child to school.

Learning crisis:

1. Evidence on AWCs and private pre-schools indicates that neither model provides appropriate inputs for the holistic development of young children.
2. An impact study on early childhood by the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development at Ambedkar University and ASER Centre found that children who regularly participate in a preschool programme perform better than children who do not.
3. But at the same time, preschool education (AWCs or private preschools) is not developmentally appropriate for children.
4. As a result, children's early learning outcomes were nowhere close to the expected levels.
5. An **all-India survey of young children by ASER in 2019** found that not even half of the enrolled children between the ages of four and eight could perform age-appropriate cognitive tasks.

Case study: Umbare Anganwadi during pandemic times:

1. The pandemic has impacted 28 million young children across India due to the sporadic closure of AWCs and private schools (UNICEF).

2. As a consequence, any progress made in ECE may be reversed. However, innovative strategies were devised to continue early education in some States.
 1. In Gujarat, the '**Umbare Anganwadi (doorstep Anganwadi) initiative**, a video series consisting of educational modules and easy-to-follow activities, was telecast every alternate day and streamed on online platforms **to promote interactive learning**.
 2. Similarly, Anganwadi workers in Haryana, Punjab, Odisha and Bihar visited homes to conduct activities with children.
3. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that access to these strategies was not uniform.
 1. They also placed a huge burden on Anganwadi workers. Paramjeet, an Anganwadi worker in Punjab, said, "We give activities for children via WhatsApp, but I cannot reach all children as every parent does not have a smartphone.
 2. Sometimes, I cannot track children as the parent who owns the smartphone is at work."
4. To understand the repercussions of school closures, ASER conducted three field surveys in 2021 and found that the learning abilities of children had regressed.
5. As we move into the third year of the pandemic, more children may be entering primary school severely unprepared.
6. To increase the quality of the education of children, it is important to **ensure early childhood education**. The recommendations in draft NEP should be implemented early.

Conclusion:

The Anganwadi model has been struggling to deliver quality ECE, but the potential of Anganwadis remains enormous.

Over the years, Anganwadi workers have **ensured last-mile delivery of ECE** and education care schemes.

It is crucial to leverage their vast reach by filling implementation and infrastructural gaps.

If we increase the honorarium of Anganwadi workers, build capacity and invest in research and development of a meaningful ECE curriculum, AWCs will be an ideal launchpad for children entering primary school.

India - US Relations

If one were to look at the long list of diplomats, officials, and ministers from across the globe rushing to New Delhi in recent times, **India's role as an emerging global superpower is quite easy to infer.**

In the context of the US, **India is the centrepiece** of the **Joe Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy** - Indian Foreign and Defence Ministers recently **held the '2+2' meeting with their American counterparts.**

Although the two countries are not sharing consensus over the **Russia-Ukraine Conflict** - one of the most worrying issues in global geopolitics, it is in their mutual interest to **rise above differences and ensure continuous cooperation.**

How have been India's Relations with the US Lately?

- India-US bilateral partnership today encompasses a whole host of issues including the **response to Covid-19, economic recovery post-pandemic, the climate crisis and sustainable development, critical and emerging technologies, supply chain resilience, education, the diaspora, and defence and security.**
- The breadth and depth of Indo-US ties remain unmatched and the drivers of this partnership have been **growing at an unprecedented rate.**
 - The relationship remains unique insofar as this is driven at both levels: at the **strategic elite as well as at the people-to-people level.**
- Although India and the US have quite **contradictory responses towards the Russia-Ukraine crisis**, in the recent meeting, the PM of India and the US President expressed that the world's two major democracies are **willing to work around their divergences** to arrive at mutually acceptable outcomes.
 - India and the US have underscored their commitment to continue to build on the momentum of recent years and **not lose sight of the larger strategic picture.**

What was the Outcome of the Recent 2+2 Dialogue?

- The dialogue saw the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on **space situational awareness** as the two nations seek to deepen cooperation

in outer space and cyberspace to develop capabilities in both “war-fighting domains”.

- They also agreed to launch an inaugural Defence **Artificial Intelligence** Dialogue, while expanding joint cyber training and exercises.
- The **defence partnership** between India and the US continues to grow rapidly with the US secretary of defence underlining that the two nations have “**identified new opportunities to extend the operational reach** of our militaries and to coordinate more closely together across the expanse of the **Indo-Pacific.**”
- The US also pointedly mentioned that China was constructing “dual-use infrastructure” along the border with India and that it would “**continue to stand alongside**” India to defend its sovereign interest.

What Could Drift the US Away?

- **Strong Indo-Russia Relations:** Russia is not a new factor in this relationship. India has **chosen to increase**, rather than reduce, import of its meagre **crude oil supplies from Russia**, being offered at a discount.
 - The **India-Russia defence relationship** has also been an irritant in the Indo-US relationship.
 - The **CAATSA law** has been part of the discussion for a long time on **India’s purchase of the S-400 Triumf missile defence system** from Russia.
 - However, there is a clear recognition in the US that any move to **sanction India would take the relationship back by decades.**
 - Despite a warning by the U.S. about the “consequences to countries that actively attempt to circumvent or backfill the sanctions,” **India and Russia are exploring ways of conducting bilateral trade by bypassing the dollar-based financial system.**
- **India’s Possibilities of Cooperation with China:** In recent years, China had looked at Indian moves in the region through the prism of their U.S. policy, but India’s stance on Ukraine has triggered a rethink in Beijing.
 - The **Chinese Foreign Minister’s recent visit to India** was an exploratory step towards a larger strategic reset with the latter, driven by the **need to wean India away from the Quad.**

- During his visit, **China offered to create a virtual G-2 in Asia** by protecting India's traditional role and collaborating on developmental projects as '**China-India Plus**' in **South Asia**.
- While Indian and American policies are at variance in countries such as Myanmar, Iran and Afghanistan, **China is the one interest that aligns the two countries together**.
- If this moment provides for a reset of India's ties with China, it will alter **India's relationship with the U.S.** and **raise questions about the effectiveness of Quad**.

What is the Way Forward?

- **India-US Military Cooperation:** The US Secretary of State for Political Affairs during her recent visit to India, acknowledged that "India's dependence on Russia for defence supplies is crucial" and that this was "legacy of security support from the Soviet Union and Russia at a time **when the US was less generous with India.**"
 - However, with the new realities of today shaping the trajectory of this bilateral engagement, **it is time for the US to help India in building its defence manufacturing base through technology transfer as well as co-production and co-development.**
- **Exploring Opportunities:** India is emerging as a leading player in an international system that is undergoing an unprecedented transformation. It shall **use its present situation to explore opportunities to further its vital interests.**
 - India and the US are **strategic partners today in the true sense of the term** - a partnership among mature major powers that is **not seeking a complete convergence but managing differences** by ensuring a continuous dialogue and channelling these differences into crafting new opportunities.
- **Cooperation in Security:** Russia's increased alignment with China as a result of the Ukraine crisis only complicates India's ability to rely on Russia as it balances China. Hence, **continuing cooperation in other security areas is in both countries' interests.**
 - **Space governance will become central to the US-India bilateral relationship**, driven by mutual concern about the increasing space capabilities of the Chinese Army.

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