

Young children, mothers and the nation

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The idea and practice of universal and compulsory primary education is two hundred years old. In comparison, the idea of universal early childhood education is much more recent. Private schools of all kinds have pre-school classes attached but this is not true of government schools of India except in some places. That is not to say that its need and importance is not acknowledged. Although the need for early childhood education for all, and particularly the underprivileged, has been emphasized in policy documents, universal early childhood education is not practiced the way it should be. Perhaps nothing in this report is surprising but it is something that needed to be recorded on a large scale.

Twenty five years ago Pratham started its work with early childhood education in slums of Mumbai. How can anyone start 'balwadis' or pre-school education centres when there are no trained teachers, no space and no money to support the project? That was the question people asked when we spoke of the need for 3,500 balwadis to ensure universal coverage of 5-year-olds who were to join formal schools the next year. But in spite of these seemingly insurmountable hurdles, we were able to set up over three thousand balwadis in a matter of three years. Of course, the pre-school centres did not have much learning material, nor did they have much space. They really depended mostly on the enthusiasm and simple skills of young local women who received a bit of training and big doses of motivation as the surrounding community called them 'didi' and 'teacher'.

The main reason why this project scaled up so quickly was because of a strong latent demand. Parents, especially mothers, wanted their children to go to pre-schools just like the children of the middle class families in the apartments nearby. In a survey we also found that the mothers were happy someone else looked after the children for a couple of hours. They could relax or earn some income by working as domestic helps. Of course, they wanted the children to learn but these other reasons were significant too. From a different perspective, in a society of nuclear families where both parents work, a safe place to look after children is necessary.

The demand for pre-school had another dimension that we had not sensed to begin with. Although the pre-school centres were for children age 3 to 5, most of the children who came were 4 or 5. So, we expected the 4-year-olds to stay in our pre-school centers for two years. But we found out that a large proportion of the children started moving to kindergartens in nearby private schools after one year. Apparently, private schools had started opening new divisions and the parents who had seen how their children were learning in our balwadis were eager to give their children 'English' education. They were willing to take the children to a slightly distant Sr. KG and also pay for it. We could not persuade them to keep the children in what must have looked like 'pre-school centres for the poor'. If parents can see an alternative they think is better and within reach, they go for it.

That was 1995-98 when a majority of children in slums of Mumbai still went to the municipal schools. Over the last quarter century much has changed. Municipal schools in Mumbai had already started emptying out from the southern tip as the population shifted beyond the suburbs from the early nineties. Today the municipal school enrollment has dropped to nearly 30% of what it used to be.

Government policy and practice has not kept pace with people's aspirations as the Indian economy liberalized. The scenario is changing rapidly over the decades. Most of the young mothers in the next decade will not be very young as median age of marriage has increased from 18.2 years in 2001 to 19.2 in 2011 to nearly 21.7 in rural India and 23.4 in urban India by 2016. Further, most of these young mothers will have had at least 5 years of schooling. These changes in the young Indian mother's profile need to be taken into account when thinking of the education inputs to be designed for the Indian child of the next decades.

In addition to the above changes, the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR): females age 15 to 64, which is the proportion of all females who supply labor for production of goods and services, has dropped significantly over the last 30 years. It was around 32% in the early nineties and it is estimated to have dropped to about 25% in 2019.² India ranks 172nd in the world in LFPR. The LFPR in rural India is 30% while it is just about 15% in urban India.³

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²<https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/india/labor-force-participation-rate>

³http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/reports_and_publication/statistical_publication/social_statistics/WM17Chapter4.pdf

Many authors and agencies have tried to explain the reason behind these trends but the important point is that the world LFPR rates for females are around 50% while we are at half of that number. Advanced economies of Europe and North America interestingly have a high LFPR (around 70%) along with East Asia, South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa; while South Asian countries have an LFPR lower than the world average along with North Africa and the Middle East (20-30%).

The status of participation of women in the labor force is a reflection of both their status in society and the needs of the economy. It seems that the need of the backward economies of Sub-Saharan Africa and the advanced economies of Europe is the same - to have more females in the labor force for completely different reasons. Low LFPR in India seems to say either that the Indian economy does not have place for women or the other way round or both. It appears to reason that higher economic growth will need much greater labor force participation of educated, skilled women of India both in rural and urban India. This is likely to be correlated with the structures that society creates to look after young children, so that young females can be freed for work (assuming they are skilled and there are opportunities created for them to work).

The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) was created first in the mid-seventies. Its core structure has not changed although it is now universalized in urban and rural communities across the country. Although it has had its successes, clearly this system is not adequate for the purpose of education of the children. There is a need to expand and upgrade it to ensure that children get adequate and correct educational inputs of the kind that are not modeled after the formal school. Secondly, there is a need to create day care centres that will allow mothers of young children to work when they find opportunities. It is possible that in future many more women will find jobs in the community centres created to look after the young while their parents work.

Bringing up the young and looking after the sick and the elderly are two areas of service that need expansion as the demand for quality education grows and as our population grows older with increasing longevity. Both these sectors should create greater opportunities for women to work although I do not want to succumb to gender stereotyping.

There is another angle to be considered. As the education levels of young mothers grow and if their intention is to stay at home, they should become much more effective caregivers at home and help the children learn more and better. Pratham has been working on projects where mothers of children who go to anganwadis are supported to help their children at home. This is proving to be very effective. Such efforts should help in creating a much stronger ecosystem of early childhood education. Our model of school education isolates the school from the home and equates it with what is learned in schools. This needs to change drastically, making it immediately possible to do much more in the early childhood stages than at higher ages.

The cause of universal compulsory primary education got a big boost in the nineties as UNICEF the world over started talking about 'primary education: the best investment a country can make'. In India, with a liberalized economy this tagline was picked up by many, then young, industrialists. Later, many who became billionaires created big foundations for education. The link between social justice and education had been around for more than a century in India but its connection with economic growth was new. The two together created the force necessary to push for at least the creation of infrastructure for education.

It is now important to stress that early childhood education is not only good for the child but it is good for the mother, the family, the society, and the economy of the country. It is for these multiple reasons that we need to strengthen and expand early childhood care and education based on what we know about the growth of the child.