The Need to reopen Anganwadis

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What is the issue?

Anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India. India must invest robustly in the world's largest social programme on early childhood services.

What is the importance of Anganwadis?

- As part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Anganwadis play a crucial role in supporting households, particularly from low-income families.
- It provides childcare, health and nutrition, education, supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up and referral services.
- Early childhood (till 5 years) is a crucial developmental window.
- As platforms for early childhood education and nutrition support, Anganwadis can play an important role for children to achieve their potential.
- Sending younger children to Anganwadis will free up women's time, including for economic activities.
- Surveys by ID insight across 5 States found that anganwadi workers were a primary source of nutrition information for families.
- The largest in the world, ICDS covers about 88 million children aged 0-6 years in India.
- The National Education Policy, 2020, places Anganwadis at the centre of the push to universalise access to early childhood care and education (ECCE).

What are the impacts of closing Anganwadis during pandemic?

- Their closure has significantly impacted service delivery and weakened an important social safety net.
- **Increase in work load for women-** A recent study estimates that the time women spend on unpaid work have increased by 30% during the pandemic.

- In our COVID-19 rural household surveys across 8 states shows 58% of women cited home-schooling as the biggest contributor to increase in unpaid work.
- **Coverage -** According to NFHS-5 during pandemic less than 15% of five year old children attended any pre-primary school.
- Last week, the government proposed a phased rollout of ECCE programme across all Anganwadis, covering one-fifth each year, starting from 2021-22.

What are the areas to improve?

- **Skill Enhancement -** Despite being the primary source of information on nutrition, anganwadi workers lack key knowledge – as found by studies from Delhi and Bihar.
- Among mothers listed with anganwadi workers, knowledge about key health behaviour such as complementary feeding and hand washing was low
- Anganwadi workers lack support or training to provide ECCE.
- **Lack of time -** Administrative responsibilities take up significant time, and core services like pre-school education are deprioritised.
- A typical worker spends around 10% of their time (28 min/day) on pre-school education against recommended (120 min/day).
- Improve career incentives and remuneration and hiring additional workers are some way to ensure they have more time.
- **Infrastructure -** Anganwadis often lack adequate infrastructure. As per NITI Aayog only 59% Anganwadis had adequate seating facilities. More than half were unhygienic.
- **Coverage -** Utilisation of early childcare services at Anganwadis stands at 28% in urban areas compared to 42% for rural areas, according to NFHS-4 data.
- Recent initiatives around home-based newborn and young child care are promising, but they need to extend beyond the first few months of a child’s life.
- **Investment -** To improve these outcomes, we need to invest more in Anganwadis, and roll out proven innovative interventions.

What are some achievements so far?

- Studies in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (and globally) have found that home visits have significantly improved cognition, language, motor development and nutritional intake while also reducing stunting.

- A study in Tamil Nadu shows that reaching out to women during pregnancy has increased the likelihood that their children use ICDS services.
- A recent study in Tamil Nadu found that an additional worker devoted to pre-school education led to cost effective gains in both learning and nutrition.
- Policymakers have tried linking Anganwadis and primary schools to strengthen convergence, as well as expanding the duration of daycares at Anganwadis.
- In order to boost coverage as they reopen, large scale enrolment drives that worked in Gujarat helped mobilise eligible children.
- As the world's largest provider of early childhood services, Anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/the-need-to-reopen-anganwadis/article37859810.ece

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