



## PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

### CREATE INDIA POLICY BRIEF 1

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Various types of pre primary schools are available in India and more children are now attending pre-school (NIPCCD, 2006) indicating an increase in demand for education at this stage. This overall increase raises questions such as whether this demand has increased everywhere. Are all children attending pre-schools if they are available? Which types of preschools do children belonging to different socio-economic groups attend? Who are the children totally excluded from pre primary schooling (zone 0 of the CREATE zones of exclusion)? Drawing on quantitative data collected in the National Family Health Survey, DISE (District Information System for Education) and the Seventh All India Education Survey as well as qualitative data collected through CREATE's community and school survey (ComSS) in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh conducted in 2008, this policy brief presents an analysis of pre-primary education in India and recommends policies for the improved provision of equitable and quality pre primary schooling. It has been written by Madhumita Bandyopadhyay and Jagannath Behera

#### Pre-school Education and Exclusion

Research suggests that pre-primary education is very important for the development of young children before they enter formal school (Kaul, 2002). It helps in cognitive development of children at the early grades of primary education and it has strong bearing on attendance and participation of children once they enter primary school.

Pre-primary education is considered to be very important for the child as it is the first step towards entering the world of knowledge as well as a healthy and purposeful life. Pre-primary education helps children become more independent and confident as well as promoting the all round development of the children (Ramachandran et al., 2003).

Children who have been to pre-primary schools tend to learn more rapidly through an organised curriculum, learning aids and by interacting with

other children. The main purpose of pre-primary education is to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal schooling and to prevent poor performance and early drop out. It also helps older children, particularly girls, to attend their schools making them free from responsibility of sibling care.

Thus it can be said that pre primary education is necessary for all children of 3-6 years old irrespective of their socio-economic background (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008). With increasing numbers of nuclear families and a lack of family support, pre primary school education is gaining importance.

Availability of quality pre primary education will promote inclusive education and meaningful access to school education by increasing enrolment and reducing the vulnerability of children to failure and drop out at later stages of education.

**Policy Initiatives for Pre-School Education in India**

Provision of early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, is one of the six Education For All (EFA) goals. Although there is no numerical target for reaching the target group within a fixed time-frame, governments have been urged to expand access, improve quality and ensure equity in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services.

Like elsewhere, the importance of pre-primary schooling has long been recognised by educational policy and programmes in India and it has also been a constitutional commitment as a part of the directive principle of the constitution.

The National policy on Education 1986 (GOI, 1986) and its Plan of Action, (GoI, 1992) have placed immense importance on pre-school education. However, it has not been considered a fundamental right, nor it is being fully managed by the educational departments at national or state level although it is partially supported by the ongoing flagship educational programme Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) which includes a major component of ECCE.

While the Ministry of Human Resource Development in India is responsible for elementary education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development deals with pre-primary education.

The Government of India launched the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in 1975. The Department of Women and Child Development has been implementing the scheme which seeks to provide health care facilities, supplementary nutritional support and to improve children's communication and cognitive skills as a preparation for entry into primary school. Initially the programme started as a project in some states but presently it covers many rural and tribal areas along with some urban pockets targeting mainly underprivileged children. The SSA envisages providing preschool education in convergence with the ICDS programme.

**Present Status of Pre Primary Education**

In India, preschool education is provided by private schools and government ICDS (*Anganwadi*) centres. In addition, there are some ECCE centres running under SSA and some

preschools are attached to government as well as private schools.

According to the estimate given by the Seventh All India Education Survey (NCERT, 2005), there are 493,700 pre-primary institutions in India, out of which 456,994 are in rural areas. These schools serve 26.453 million children of which 12.829 million are girls according to DISE (District Information System for Education) data (2007-08). The percentage of enrolment in primary schools with pre-primary facilities is low. It was 10% in 2007-08 compared to 7.7% in 2004-05. The highest percentage of pre-primary enrolment in primary schools is in Madhya Pradesh (19.6%) and the lowest of 5.0% in Bihar (Mehta, 2010). The third round (2005-06) of National Family Health Survey data (IIPS, 2007) shows that around 56% of children in pre school are enrolled in *Anganwadis* (ICDS Centres) for early childhood care and education. Among them only 31% of children are attending the centres regularly. A large variation is also found in access to early childhood care and education across the states.

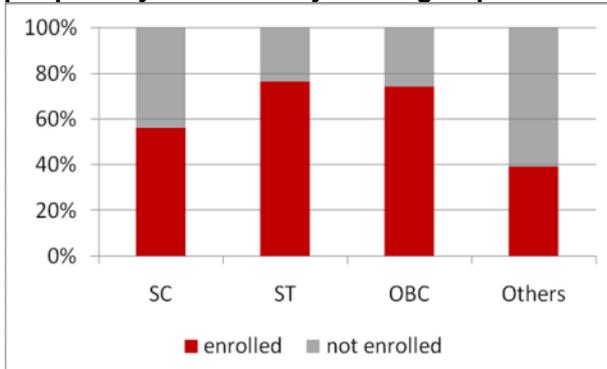
**Access to Pre Primary Education in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh**

ComSS data collected by CREATE from one district (Rajnandgaon) in Chhattisgarh and two districts (Rewa and Dindori) in Madhya Pradesh suggests that enrolment rates in pre-primary school vary considerably across the three clusters and between social groups.

Around 70% of children are enrolled in various types of pre primary education in these three clusters (comprising 36 villages). The highest enrolment has been recorded in Rajnandgaon district (89%) followed by Dindori (81%) and Rewa (35%). Although the majority of these children are attending *Anganwadi* (ICDS centres), a considerable proportion of children are also attending private schools. A higher proportion attends private pre primary education in Rewa compared to Rajnandgaon. In the absence of private schools, almost all the children in the tribal dominated villages in Dindori are enrolled in *Anganwadi*.

Figure 1 shows that a high proportion of children belonging to scheduled tribes (ST) are enrolled in pre-primary education followed by other backward classes (OBC), scheduled caste (SC) and children from other social groups.

**Figure-1: Percentage of children enrolled in pre-primary education by social group**

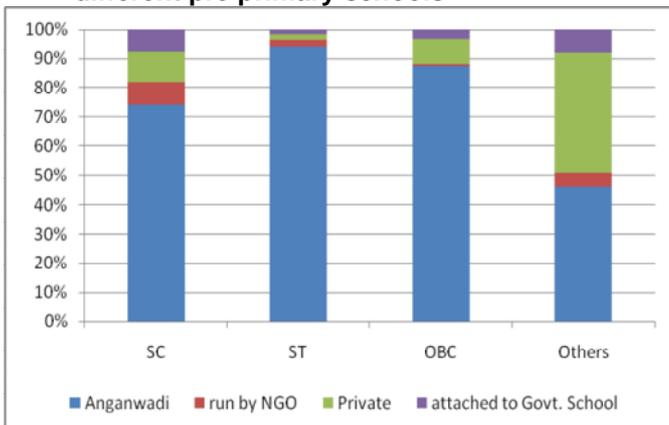


Source: Household Data, 2008

The quality of pre-primary education for the tribal children in tribal area is poor due to lack of qualified teachers and supervisory staff (NIPCCD, 1992). Availability of free food in the *Anganwadi* centres may be the cause of high enrolment in poor tribal areas.

At the time of the field visit, we found that less than half of the children among the total enrolled are attending pre-primary education. Among children belonging to scheduled tribes who attend pre-primary school approximately 95% of children go to *Anganwadi* centres, whereas 45% of children belonging to other castes go to *Anganwadis* (Figure 2). The children from other castes account for the highest proportion of the children who attend private pre-primary education as these are the children whose parents can afford to pay for such school.

**Figure-2: Children in different social groups in different pre primary schools**



Source: Household Data, 2008

One study (NCERT, 2006) shows that boys' enrolment is higher than girls' enrolment in pre-

primary schools. Our field survey data shows that in pre-primary education boys' enrolment in *Anganwadis* is slightly less than girls. But in private pre-primary schools the boys' enrolment is much higher as compared to girls.

Children whose fathers are employed in the service sector account for the highest proportion in total enrolment in pre-school education followed by children whose father are employed as a labourer or engaged in farming. From the data it is clear that most of the children belonging to tribal groups are enrolled in *Anganwadis* (ICDS centres).

Although most of the children are enrolled only a small proportion attend pre-primary education regularly. These children are mostly from poorer households who cannot afford private pre-primary school even though it is available locally and also because of the availability of free food in these centres.

**Policy Recommendations**

From the above discussion it is clear that there is a considerable variation in access to pre-primary education among children between 3 to 6 years old with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Children belonging to marginalised groups in society, particularly girls, depend on public pre-primary schools, whereas those belonging to higher socio-economic groups are more likely to attending private schools. Since education of children between 3-6 years old is not a fundamental right, it is not legally mandated. Because of this preschool education is suffering from inadequate coverage and poor quality benefiting very few children.

However, it is an important constitutional commitment as it is part of the Directive Principle and is also one of the EFA goals. It also as mentioned earlier has a significant positive effect on sustained meaningful access to education, so it should be given immediate attention in view of its important role in children's lives.

- The quality of teaching in public pre primary *Anganwadi* centres is unsatisfactory due to a lack of trained teachers. The government needs to invest in an improvement of quality of services in *Anganwadi* centres including pre-school education, which will improve the learning achievement of children at pre-primary stage.

- Provision of equitable access to all eligible children in the country requires expanding the coverage of the ICDS programme by opening more pre-school centres or attaching such provision to existing government primary schools. Many states have already started these initiatives but the situation is far from satisfactory.
- To ensure the quality of preschool education it is important to provide well qualified and trained teachers for pre primary schools.
- More focus is needed for quality pre-primary education for disadvantaged groups living in poor and remote areas. The pre-primary education component of the ICDS programme although evident on paper is often non-existent in reality.
- Facilities are important and must be safe, healthy and suitable environments for young children.
- Free food distributed in pre primary schools plays an important role in attracting the poorest sections of society to attend regularly and averting nutritional problems. These schemes should be maintained and expanded.
- The play materials in most of the AWCs visited are locked up in cupboards. This seems be a result of a fairly common belief that expensive and attractive things are too precious to be handled by children and need to be brought out for display only during inspections. The same is the case with library books in schools. Materials in pre primary schools should be made available to children to use, regularly inspected, updated and replaced.
- Different government departments need to implement pre-school education in a coordinated manner avoiding duplication and overlapping of interventions.
- The monitoring and evaluation of existing programmes such as ICDS and ECCE is another important issue that needs to be carried out more frequently to supplement the inputs into these programmes. This also plays a crucial role for better planning and policy implementation to ensure wide coverage of quality pre-primary education in the future.

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This Policy Brief has been written by Madhumita Bandyopadhyay and Jagannath Behera based on data from CREATE's research in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh as well as secondary sources.



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