

Nation's future starts with child's early learning

- Amitabh Kant*

India's growth, competitiveness, and demographic dividend hinge on a powerful yet often overlooked investment—learning early and learning well. With 250 million children under ten, India stands at a critical demographic moment; 137 million of today's youth will join the workforce by 2047, shaping our future. The foundation laid in early years is what ultimately drives the nation's long-term productivity, innovation, and economic growth—making early learning central to Viksit Bharat. Longitudinal research (Vellore, 2024) shows quality early learning boosts cognition by 1.9 points. Yet Early Childhood Education (ECE) is only the beginning. The real test comes when children enter classrooms. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)—the ability to read, comprehend, and use numbers – are the building blocks that determine how well children can engage with all future learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognises this and prioritises universal quality ECE and FLN by Grade 3 — two cornerstones of India's human capital strategy, delivered through strengthened Anganwadis, Balvatikas, and early primary grades.

Ages 3–5: Nurturing curiosity and care — Strengthening Anganwadis

Children aged 3-5 mainly receive care and education in Anganwadis, the world's largest publicly funded early childhood system with 14 lakh centres serving 60% of eligible children. But Anganwadi workers juggle multiple roles — nutrition, administration, pre-school education — stretching their capacity to deliver quality learning.

In India, structured ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) programs have demonstrated 3–19 point gains in IQ by ages five and nine (Vellore study, 2024; K. Muralidharan et al.), improving not only cognition but attention, motivation, and social-emotional strength.

Evidence from JPAL studies and pilots in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh shows that adding a dedicated educator doubles learning time, improves cognition, reduces stunting, and boosts school readiness. It also increases instruction time from 18 to 75 minutes in a 2-hour observation window (K. Muralidharan).

Of the existing 14 lakh Anganwadi Centres, 12 lakh require an additional educator. India has the opportunity to create 12 lakh jobs for women educators in the next few years in existing Anganwadi Centres, with annual investments of approximately ₹13,000 crore (₹1.1 lakh/person/annum). This would help transform every Anganwadi into an aspirational playschool with an ideal 1:20 educator–child ratio and improve ECE for over 10 crore children annually. The candidate pool from the Central Teacher

Eligibility Test, Nursery Teacher Training, and Home Science courses provides an adequate supply of potential educators.

Implementing this enhanced educator model will empower millions of women, elevate early learning quality, and position Anganwadis as a cornerstone of Viksit Bharat.

Ages 5–6: Building school readiness — Expanding Balvatikas

As children approach age five, many leave Anganwadis, with only 37% of 5-year-olds and 11% of 6-year-olds still enrolled—a steep drop from nearly 60% coverage for 4-year-olds (ASER 2024). Consequently, a substantial number of children enter Grade 1 without the foundational skills needed for school success. Where local schools are equipped with dedicated space, staff, and resources, establishing Balvatika sections (pre-primary sections) can bridge this gap and improve readiness for formal schooling.

Only 9% of government schools with pre-primary sections have dedicated ECE teachers, and very high child-to-educator ratios. Adding a low-cost, dedicated ECE educator in Tamil Nadu has driven measurable learning gains through RCT-evaluated models— proving that investment in qualified staff translates into better school readiness. The Ministry of Education has recognised this and included Balvatika under the NIPUN Bharat mission, with recurring grants of ₹2 lakh/school, an additional ₹1 lakh every 5 years, and ₹500/child for learning materials starting in 2025.

Several states have moved rapidly on this. Uttar Pradesh is hiring 20,000 Balvatika educators and investing ₹260 crore from Samagra Shiksha budgets in hiring of ECCE educators. Odisha has introduced pre-primary grades in over 45,000 primary and composite schools, hiring an equal number of dedicated helpers to ensure effective classroom support. Haryana has also expanded pre-primary education to over 8000 primary schools.

By using the implementation experience of these states, India can successfully bridge readiness gaps nationwide. Deploying an additional ECE educator in every ‘high enrollment school’ (primary school with over 100 children) can be achieved at ~₹10,600/child/year. Focusing on scaling these proven models with increased resource allocation under Samagra Shiksha is key to establishing high-quality Balvatikas.

Ages 6–10: Mastering fundamentals — Accelerating Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)

Between ages six and seven, children enter Grade 1, where Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) become the bedrock of lifelong learning. National assessments such as ASER 2024 and NAS 2024 show encouraging gains, reflecting focused progress

under NIPUN Bharat through better materials, stronger teacher training, and regular classroom monitoring across Grades 1–3.

The next step is to extend the FLN focus to Grades 4 and 5, ensuring children transition to middle school with confidence to read, reason, and solve problems. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu offer promising policy innovations like district PMUs, strengthened middle-management cadres, Vidya Samiksha Kendras, and volunteer-led remediation that have improved monitoring and enabled clearer, outcome-focused goal-setting.

To sustain gains, India must introduce advanced reading and math materials that build higher-order skills like critical thinking, creativity, and communication and launch a nationwide campaign to mobilize parents and communities around foundational learning.

Accelerating FLN through continued investments in teacher support, data-driven monitoring, and upper primary integration will be vital to sustaining learning outcomes and powering India's long-term productivity and innovation.

India stands at the cusp of a historic opportunity. A seamless continuum of strong Anganwadis, Balvatikas with dedicated ECE educators, and foundational learning is not just an education strategy—it is the engine of productivity, innovation, and inclusive growth central to Viksit Bharat. Realising this vision will require bold action, sustained focus, and collective commitment across government, communities, and partners. This is India's pathway to unlocking its full economic and social potential.

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