

Gen Viksit Needs to Start Young

- **Amitabh Kant***

Just last week, I met Namya Mahajan, a Harvard Business School (HBS) alumna, who has returned to India to strengthen early childhood care and education through a non-profit organisation called Rocket Learning. She told me her idea to transform India was simple: "We start at the beginning."

Started in 2020 by siblings and HBS alumni Namya Mahajan and Azeez Gupta, Rocket Learning is focused on an overlooked truth: India's 'Viksit Bharat' ambition will be won or lost in the first six years of life.

There is enough data to show that [eighty-five percent](#) of brain development happens before a child turns six. Just [18 months](#) of structured early learning in an Anganwadi can raise IQ in measurable ways. For [13.7](#) crore children under six, the Viksit Bharat Generation, those years will decide whether they become the drivers of productivity and innovation in 2047.

Our republic's first 75 years were a struggle for survival. We needed to focus on the absolute basics - maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, hunger, and trying to lift millions out of poverty. The next 25 years must be about productivity, competitiveness and prosperity, sustained on nine to ten percent annual growth.

However, the evidence on early learning is sobering. Nearly half of Grade I children cannot read a single word or recognise a number. Despite the reforms of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India continues to face learning poverty from the start. Yet there are signs of progress. The [ASER 2024](#) report shows rising enrolment in Anganwadis, reflecting growing parental trust in these centres. That trust must now translate into transformation. The PM's launch of the [Swasth Nari Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan](#), alongside the nationwide observance of Poshan Maah in every Anganwadi, is embedding health, nutrition and childcare practices into the core of the system. These are the foundations on which stronger mothers, stronger children and, ultimately, a stronger nation will stand.

For decades, Anganwadis have been undervalued as little more than feeding centres. They are in fact an inseparable part of India's early childhood system, the hubs through which nutrition, health and playful learning converge. At the center of this system are almost [14 lakh Anganwadi workers](#). Mothers are a child's first teachers; Anganwadi workers are the second. As frontline educators and caregivers, their role must be strengthened with training, resources and dignity. Not empowering this workforce will impact the quality of outcomes.

Expanding Anganwadis into a universal system of childcare would also deliver gains on multiple fronts. It would unleash *Nari Shakti* by enabling higher female labour force participation, lift household incomes and strengthen human capital at scale. At the same time, close to nine crore children, healthy and school-ready, would become the driving force of India's future growth.

Tata Trusts' [Project Spotlight](#) in Maharashtra provides clear evidence of what is possible when existing public systems are strengthened with focus and intent. Implemented across over 4,100 Anganwadi Centres in Chandrapur, Gadchiroli and Palghar, and reaching close to 2.8 million people, the programme was designed to reinforce the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) rather than create parallel structures. Its approach rested on three pillars - system strengthening, community mobilisation, and multi-level advocacy. Anganwadis were refurbished and equipped, frontline workers including Anganwadi workers, ASHAs and ANMs were trained in nutrition and growth monitoring, and large-scale Jan Andolan campaigns engaged families on breastfeeding, dietary

diversity and caregiving practices. [Between 2019 and 2021, dietary diversity among mother–child pairs in intervention areas increased from 10 percent to 25 percent, while poor diversity declined significantly.](#)

Technology too has shown how it can accelerate transformation when designed around people. [Rocket Learning](#) has reached more than 40 lakh children and worked with three lakh Anganwadi workers in just five years. Its model combines digital nudges with behaviour change. Simple daily activities sent on WhatsApp guide parents to engage their children in play-based learning using household materials. An [independent evaluation](#) in Amravati, Maharashtra, found that Rocket Learning’s intervention improved mathematics skills by 0.217 standard deviations and language skills by 0.154 standard deviations, at a cost of just over one US dollar per child. Parents report higher confidence, children arrive at Grade I better prepared, and Anganwadi workers gain recognition as educators. This is technology deployed not for substitution but for support, amplifying human relationships between caregivers, children and educators.

[Pratham’s Teaching at the Right Level \(TaRL\)](#) has established that even the weakest learning foundations can be rebuilt and at scale. [Independent evaluations](#) confirm that Pratham’s Read India programme recorded a 51 percent increase in reading ability among children in Grades 3–5, alongside large gains in addition and subtraction. The efficacy of the program, rigorously validated by Nobel Prize–winning research in development economics, shows the power of simple, scalable pedagogy when embedded into state systems.

These models demonstrate that India is not short of solutions. The challenge is urgency and resolve.

India’s growth story must rest on both fiscal stability and human capital. Revenues must rise, deficits must narrow and capital expenditure must continue to drive productivity and jobs. But without parallel and significant investments in early childhood, growth will plateau, and the demographic dividend will slip away. Today, the country’s investment in 3-5 year olds, the Viksit Bharat generation, is [less than 20%](#) of what we invest in children in middle and senior school. We must start investing more in the Anganwadi system where the potential of children is shaped for the rest of their lives.

If we succeed, the Viksit Bharat Generation will be the most capable in our history. Healthier, more skilled, and globally competitive. They will not only power a multi trillion-dollar economy, but they will also place India at the cutting edge of innovation and human capital. We need to bet big on our children. For this, early childhood care and education is the key. This is the strategic investment that will define India’s leadership in the decades ahead.

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