

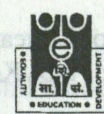
With Compliments

# Globalizing Education

## Perceptions and Processes

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**Universal Primary Education (UPE)** Full enrolment of all children in the primary school age-group, i.e. 100 per cent net enrolment ratio.

**Unreached Population** Various categories of target groups living in difficult circumstances: street children and working children, school drop-outs, marginalised youth, girls and women, migrants, displaced persons and refugees.

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## CRITICAL ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TODAY

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Most outstanding, to the most casual observer of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is its unexpectedly vast, quantitative expansion in the last three decades; its sharp polarization, like other levels of education in India, into two sectors; and overall, with a few honourable exceptions, its poor quality in terms of achieving the objectives of holistic development of the young child. These three aspects are also closely linked in several ways, notably by the "invisibility" of the young child in law, policy and academe, and by blindness to gender issues.

### Quantity, Quality and Equity

To take size first, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the largest public sector programme for young children, launched in 1974, is today estimated to reach about 2 crore children between the ages of 3 and 6, that is, about a quarter of the population in that age-group. A comprehensive programme of services for child development, with six components, one of which is quaintly described to this day as "non-formal preschool education", it aims to reach the most vulnerable sections of the population, in rural and tribal areas and urban slums. The private sector, which has seen phenomenal and unanticipated growth, mostly in urban areas, but also now extending

widely to rural and semi-rural areas, is still unrecognized as an area of education, unregulated and unaccounted for, therefore as yet uncounted. No survey has ever been done, but "guesstimates" suggest that it might well provide for another 2 crores of children.

This sharp polarisation not merely reflects the prevailing situation at all levels of education, but has been the outcome of official neglect of this age group, based on indifference, lack of understanding of its importance and skewed priorities. Of late, it has been reinforced by the expressed inclination towards privatization at all levels of education, the hallmark of globalising tendencies. However, it has left space for the growth of a tiny but vibrant innovative third sector, the voluntary or non-for-profit sector, financially supported by the "welfare" departments of the State, (not the educational departments) and philanthropy.

Coming to quality aspects, the ICDS is a mixed bag of services, with uneven but on the whole very low quality, for both financial and non-financial reasons. The private sector, largely, especially at the lower economic end, often touted as "English-medium convent school" (which alas it rarely is) is what I have described elsewhere as "untrained and underpaid teachers in ill-equipped and unsafe classrooms thrusting unnecessary information down the throats of unwilling children by inappropriate methods" often with damaging, if not outright dangerous, outcomes for children. Not surprisingly, the voluntary sector, left to its own devices, and often led by educational pioneers, idealists and innovators has often flowered into islands of creative excellence. The private sector, because it also caters to the higher and more prestigious social classes, who can generally afford better quality of services, has become a model and hence a pernicious influence on the public as well as voluntary sector, under pressure from parents who see it as a model for comparison.

Overall, the picture of the ECE classroom is of an overcrowded, didactic, highly verbal, group-oriented, school-related, and authoritarian one, mirroring the primary school, with little awareness or concern for the developmental needs of the young child. While the public sector pays at least lip-service to holistic development as the goal, though it may be weak in practice, for reasons discussed below, the private sector denies it, the voluntary sector being in a state of confusion, pulled in different directions.

## Uneven Playing Field

This is of course, a very broad and sweeping generalization, which must be understood to have considerable variation in reality. The table below gives an impressionistic comparative overview of the characteristics of the three sectors and what they can gain from each other.

Characteristics of ECE in the Three Sectors

Item	Govt. (Semi -Govt. and Aided)	Voluntary	Private
1. Goal	Policy implementation	Social benefit	Profit
2. Name/Centre Worker	Anganwadi Anganwadi worker	Balwadi/child care centre Balwadi teacher/worker	School (nursery preprimary etc) Teacher
3. Objective and Scope	Comprehensive, holistic development	Child care/ development/ education and community needs	Formal education and school preparation
4. Components	Package of six services in ICDS	Varying - mostly education, care and nutrition	Education, some custodial
5. Approach to teaching-learning	Activity based, non-formal	Varying- informal to formal	Formal, school-like
6. Target group	Defined by policy groups	Low-income and underprivileged	Following social demand
7. Cost to parents	Free	Free/nominal charges	Varying payment
8. Worker preparation	3 months job-training with some ECE component, occasional refresher	Varying, informal, non-standardised	Minimal-none or irrelevant training

9. Community involvement	Low	Varying-low to high	Minimal/none
10. Flexibility in programme	None-standardized and fixed from above	Responsive to child and community needs, culturally sensitive	Standardised and arbitrarily decided
11. Perceived ownership	Government	Variable-low to high community ownership	Individual/ Company
12. Management style	Hierarchical, non-transparent	Attempt at participation and transparency	Hierarchical, non-transparent

### The "Invisible" Child

The broad underlying factor or "explanation" for all these inter-related phenomena can be said to be the "invisibility" of young children to policy makers, and consequent lack of recognition of ECE either as a stage of education or a discipline, or a programme. The resulting lack of theoretical foundations, concepts, ideology or methodology, has led on the ground to a lack of "recognized" training at different levels, which are necessary to develop personnel for the classroom, as well as for supervision, guidance, training, monitoring, research, policy making, and so on. Hence the ICDS, after thirty years, still has only a three-month job-training course as preparation for its workers, (not called teachers) with a small component of so-called "preschool education" and still no certification or recognition of their skills. Hence, the private sector is staffed almost entirely either by "untrained teachers" at the lowest economic level, or by inappropriately trained ones (primary or secondary training) among the better off. Hence, only a handful of training institutions still survive in this hostile atmosphere, many of them still clinging to archaic concepts, models and methods. Hence, at the university level, diplomas and degrees are few and far between, though Child Development has emerged as an area of post-graduate study and hence, in the voluntary sector, most NGOs manage with no training or with their own simple and ad-hoc trainings at various level of efficiency, while a handful of excellent resource and training institutions have emerged over the years.

### Gender Blindness and Bias

Besides the deadening influence of "invisibility", about which there is a conspiracy of silence, powerful influences affecting the nature and quality of ECE, grow out of gender blindness. It is significant that ECE has so far been perceived, not as a women's issue, but as something mainly concerning the welfare of children, or as the first step in the educational ladder.

In content, too, ECE has been linked to the school system, from where it draws its models, inspiration and weaknesses. Neither trade unions (which have not been deeply concerned with women's issues anyway) nor women's organizations have taken up day care as an issue of critical importance to women. Yet the very survival and development of millions of children are threatened by the "double disadvantage" of poverty and working mothers. The vast mass of women workers in the unorganized sector has remained unheard and unseen. As a result, there has been a very limited growth of day care in the workplace or in the community, and options like family-based care, so popular in other developing countries, have not taken root.

Day care, then, has never been a hot favourite among the social services. But strangely, the stances of all segments of the women's movement, from the service-oriented welfare agencies, to the party-linked mass organizations, and the autonomous groups of activists and feminists, have been similar. There has not been a big public hue and cry about day care for working women from any section, highlighting once more how difficult it is to get away from the deeply internalized conviction that childcare is the woman's, if not specifically the mother's responsibility.

In a country where 12 crores of women are in the work force and 90% of them in the unorganized sector, where one out of three adult women is working and a quarter of the entire work force is female, this blindness is really astounding.

But the lack of concern and awareness about women's multiple roles has had an impact beyond lack of services, limiting the very content and nature of ECE. A strong pressure for day care might have enriched ECE with a more holistic perspective than the present school-related one, and long ago exposed the absurdity of confining children to formal group teaching methods for the entire day. Again, if infants had been in day care in large numbers, the inadequacy of formality

and group teaching may have been exposed by now. And the irrelevance of concepts of desirable adult-child ratios and group size drawn from higher levels of education, might have become obvious, for women concerned with child care at the level of everyday family reality, know only too well the kind of adult response needed to care for children of varying ages. A more realistic perception of costs would also undoubtedly have resulted. In the absence of such influences, however, the typical Indian ECE model is a half-day "centre" for a group of children aged three to six, focusing on "teaching" which means, in practice, preparing them for school. The other "faces" of ECE have disappeared.

### Other Faces of Gender Inequality

Gender inequity makes itself obvious in other ways too. Till recently, the link between ECE and the education of young girls, who are often prevented by their responsibilities for sibling care from attending schools, has been neither perceived nor acted upon. There are obviously multiple reasons for girls' non-attendance at school, child care being but one of them. Many studies provide disturbing evidence that rural girls of this age work up to eight hours a day and that much of this time is spent on household chores, including childcare. It seems that girls are too useful at home to be sent to school.

It is difficult to state, from existing information, to what extent girls are missing school because of child care responsibilities. Deep-seated gender prejudices are revealed in the common assumption that girls are "naturally" expected to assist their mothers in child care, and that it helps to prepare them for their future roles as mothers and home-makers. What it does meanwhile to their present chances of education, and the role that ECE might play as the vital missing link in the chain, are the issues less easily perceived and more easily ignored.

Gender rears its ugly head once more in the marginalisation and exploitation of those who work with young children. (almost all of whom are women). Both child care workers in the public sector and so called "teachers" in the private sector are customarily paid an outrageously low and exploitative wage, and have little status, social recognition, job security or prospects of advancement. Training is often altogether missing, as pointed out earlier, or is very slight and inadequate, or irrelevant. Lurking behind these phenomena may be yet another gender stereotype, that child care/education comes

'naturally' to women and does not need any specialized training. The downgrading of jobs typically perceived as feminine and the tempting possibilities of a pool of cheap, "untrained", unorganized, non-mobile female labour may also lie behind the consistent refusal to "recognize" ECE as an academic field in its own right. The possibility, that ECE continues to remain unrecognized largely because it is in the female domain, should not be dismissed as far-fetched.

These three issues concerning ECE-day care, girls' education and the fate of women child care workers – illustrate how the course of development is affected by value systems and thought processes reflecting prevailing gender inequities. Perhaps in the Indian context these should cause more concern than questions of sexism in the preschool curriculum or the numbers of boys and girls attending preschools.

### Globalization – the Bad Fairy

With the introduction of LPG (liberalization, privatization and globalization) in the nineties there has been a steady withdrawal of the state from the social sector, indicated by declining expenditure on health and education, repeated emphasis and glorification of market forces, and refusal to entertain the idea of regulation of the private sector. This holds out little hope for the poor. But recently, there have been some faint signs of the removal of some of the "invisibility" of ECE at least, in the public sector.

Article 45 of our Constitution enshrines the right of all children up to the age of 14 to education. Yet the Government of India, which has ratified both the Jomtien Declaration, whose opening words are the unforgettable "Learning begins at birth", and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) wished through the 83<sup>rd</sup> Amendment (1997) to deprive young children of their rights forever. This infamous legislation aimed to derecognise the rights of the young child, and make sure that the State has no responsibility for the care and development of the child below six years of age, making the family, and the family, alone, responsible. Surely this was the most anti-child move made by the State since Independence. Besides, it was anti-poor, since early intervention is the best way to bridge the gap between the privileged few and the deprived majority. Not only that, it was also deeply anti-woman. For when the young child was derecognised, the services of the millions of women child care workers, the "the first

teachers" of the child, would also have been delegitimised. These women would then never again have been recognized as skilled or trained workers, or as teachers deserving respect for their work, and so entitled to a decent wage.

Strangely, the National Policy on Education (1986) had clearly stated that childcare workers would be treated on par with primary teachers, and receive similar emoluments and working conditions. But this amendment would have condemned them to live forever as mere "volunteers", (though not by their own choice), and to receive only a meager pittance cruelly called an honorarium, far less than the Minimum Wage available to unskilled workers. Was this not crass exploitation of women, denying the worth of their work and making a skilled task a mere extension of women's domestic role?

If that was the plight of the one million or more anganwadi workers employed by the State, still worse was that of the several million "untrained" teachers working in the "unrecognized" private nursery schools, a grey area of the private sector which thrives on exploiting women's work. And was not the refusal to recognize day-care for the young child a proof that the State was also deeply anti-labour, denying the needs and rights of working mothers?

### A Glimmer of Light

Luckily, the worst was averted due to the determined efforts and struggle of activist groups and networks over five years to advocate for the young child. It is true that the amendment (passed in 2002 and now called 93<sup>rd</sup>) promises free and compulsory education only to children between the ages of six and fourteen. It makes no mention of equitable or reasonable quality for all, and it interprets compulsion as being on the parents. But at the same time, Article 45 has been rewritten to read "The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years" and thus "recognizes" ECE as an entity in law, at the level of the Constitution, for the first time in our history. This can be seen, in one sense, as a victory for the young child, snatched at the last moment from the jaws of eternal oblivion.

But this is only a reprieve; a small beginning for it is only an enabling law, a Directive Principle not a justiciable fundamental right. Much remains to be done, not only at the level of programming, but

even more so, at the level of "recognition" as academic discipline at various levels of, of workers as teachers, of training and capacity building and so on, already described. It is neither possible nor necessary here to describe in detail the steps needed -but they should be in the direction of growth with equity, marrying quantity with quality, above all giving a strong role to the State in protecting child rights, especially of the poor. This role is far greater than only provision of direct services in the public sector. It must go beyond to include all children in the country in its purview dealing with different sectors by different instrumentalities and appropriate regulatory and supportive measures.

In the present climate, continued struggle by progressive people's movements will be needed over a long period to achieve the objectives of "ECE for all" and with gender equity. But now that the veil of "invisibility" has been lifted, let us lift also the veil of gender bias, and look with new eyes at the long road ahead, leading to the development of all young children. Let us take the first step by recognizing the young child!

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According to the Bill, Article 21A, which reads as follows, shall be inserted in the Constitution : "The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age six to fourteen years in such manner as the State, may by law, decide". For the existing Article 45, a new article shall be substituted as follows: Through an amendment of Article 51 A, which lists the fundamental duties, the Bill provides for the addition of a clause whereby it shall become the fundamental duty of a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child, or, as the case may be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years.

