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Spare a thought for our kids

Let our children, including those at the margins of territory, identity, services, social and economic interventions, find themselves future-ready



SUMITRA MISHRA

Infants and children — naked, hungry, crying, sleeping in overcrowded trucks, on the shoulders of their tired parents and caretakers. These were some of the heart-breaking pictures that emerged as everyday lives were disrupted following the COVID lockdown put in place in March across India. The multiple fault lines of our societal order were more visible than ever as migrant workers and their families were seen out on the roads across major cities, while the rest of us took to working from home. This was not “a long walk to freedom”. It was a walk back home through a terrain that was as indifferent as it was strange. It was reverse migration, a story of lost livelihoods and ever-increasing struggles. For some, it was a walk to their deaths.

As we battle the Coronavirus and its varied impacts on our lives, it is important that we do not lose sight of these fault lines. It has especially hit the families of workers in the unorganised sector, who do not have adequate social protection, support and additionally find it hard to provide adequate care to their children.

One of the casualties of the lockdown was the slew of programmes tackling malnutrition. As per the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16), 21 per cent children below the age of five in India were undernourished, 91.4 per cent of the children aged six to 23 months did not receive an adequate diet, one in three (38 per cent) of children under five years of age was stunted, one in five (21 per cent) of the children was wasted, 36 per cent were underweight. The lockdown resulted in a more dire situation where the resulting socio-economic impacts, the closing down of anganwadi centres and the resource crunch minimised the likelihood of availability of food to counter malnutrition.

These intersecting impacts of poverty, gender discrimination, caste and class differences, violence, issues of availability and accessibility of services to the young child and lack of professionalisation of childcare workers are brought to the fore in the *State of the Young Child in India* (SOYC) report, that Mobile Creches, an organisation working for early childhood development (ECD), released recently. While the report was finalised before the pandemic hit the world, it nevertheless offers important insights into the status of India's children under six years of age — who form over 13 per cent of the country's population — in addition to a critical examination of legislative frameworks designed to address their needs. The report also goes beyond a homogenising understanding of the child, as it emphasises various disadvantaged categories within this age group and the dire situation they are in. It calls for specific interventions for each vulnerable category, otherwise it results in a risk of lifelong consequences of deprivation.

The results emerging from the indexing can be used to draw out good practices from top performers like Kerala and Goa and turning more attention towards the poor-performing regions and States like Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. With recommendations stemming from exhaustive analysis, it can also enable in envisioning a post-pandemic world where the issues of marginalisation and neglect receive due attention and policy intervention.

The Integrated Child Development Services

“ THE PER CHILD EXPENDITURE IN THE COUNTRY FOR 2018-19 WAS AN ABYSMALLY LOW FIGURE OF ₹1,723. THIS MUST BE ENHANCED TO ₹1.25 TRILLION ANNUALLY TO COVER FUNDING GAPS AND ENSURE HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS. THIS APPROACH HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BRING IN RETURNS THAT WOULD EXCEED BUDGETARY SPENDS ON ANY ALTERNATIVE WELFARE PROGRAMME ”



scheme (ICDS), the world's largest programme catering to children, requires recalibration for it suffers from design and capacity deficits, does not adequately address the components of care and early education and is still a long way from reaching the most marginalised in an effective and equitable manner.

The youngest child is often the most invisible and exceptionally vulnerable. This calls for tapping development opportunities in this young age that can set a healthy foundation for life. Investment in ECD not only has the potential to enhance individual capacity and economic growth, it also provides an opening for women empowerment by recognising the overlapping rights of women and children and bringing in State interventions and increased budgetary allocations.

The SOYC report recognises the biological role in care-giving yet questions the gendered stereotypes that result in an undue burden on the mother. In the unorganised sector especially, women are bogged down by a triple burden — the responsibility of childcare, work outside the home that mostly entails unequal access to the market, longer working hours, unhealthy working environment and lesser wages, and the household work as well. Often, young children are seen lying or roaming around these unsafe work sites since these women are deprived of maternity or childcare benefits. This weak support system compromises their ability to provide quality care to the infant/child. Therefore, it is important that where families are unable to pro-

vide due childcare, compounded by their multiple issues, the State steps in as an enabler. As the sole scheme to cater to the needs of children of women engaged in the informal sector, the Government-sponsored National Crèche Scheme has actually seen a reduction in the number of creches, with only 7,930 of them functional across the country in 2019, which translates into one creche per 21,000 children. The scheme needs to be re-imagined and strengthened with serious revision of the budget, and this can also be supplemented by a phased conversion of anganwadis into anganwadi-creches.

The pandemic-induced lockdown witnessed a rare visibility of anganwadi and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers as they emerged to be the first line of defence in dealing with the contagion. However, as the SOYC report notes, they are otherwise marginalised — not seen as a professional cadre, treated as part-time workers, paid well below the minimum wages in most States. There is a pressing need for their critical role in the childcare ecosystem to be recognised, acknowledged, professionalised and for their remuneration to be in line with their responsibilities. The professionalisation of this service will also mean adequate training of these workers and can strengthen the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) component, which remains a weak focus of the ICDS.

All children in the ages of three to six should have a right to quality ECCE, irrespective of whether they are located at anganwadi centres, pre-pri-

mary sections of Government, private schools or any other pre-school centres.

For the country, prioritising ECD can translate into fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals and its international commitment towards child rights. While data paucity on multiple dimensions of child well-being hampered the indexing process and a more accurate insight in certain areas, the budgetary analysis through national-level data and allocations to States brings forth issues of inadequate allocation, under-utilisation, lack of management capacity to cater to the needs of children.

The per child expenditure in the country for 2018-19 was an abysmally low figure of ₹1,723. This must be enhanced to ₹1.25 trillion annually to cover funding gaps and ensure holistic interventions. This approach has the potential to bring in returns that would exceed budgetary spends on any alternative welfare programme.

Coronavirus has significantly altered the way we thought of our lives, our work and our very support systems. It has taught us lessons, tragic ones at that.

Yet, it is in this moment that we must recognise the deprivations, neglect and exclusion that mar equitable access of various vulnerable groups, including children, to essential services. Let our children, including those at the margins of territory, identity, services, social and economic interventions, find themselves capable for the future.

(The writer is Executive Director at Mobile Creches and an early childhood development activist)