

The Anganwadi Scheme

Why in news?

The Anganwadi scheme, designed to support children under six, is yet to fulfil its potential.

What is the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)?

- The scheme was launched on 2nd October, 1975, and is one of the flagship programmes of the Government of India.
- It represents one of the world's largest and unique programmes for early childhood care and development.
- It is the foremost symbol of country's commitment to its children and nursing mothers.
- The scheme is a response to the challenge of providing pre-school non-formal education on one hand and breaking the vicious cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity and mortality on the other.
- The beneficiaries under the Scheme are children in the age group of 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- The Anganwadi system is part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the government which serves over 30 million children in the age group of 3-6 in 1.3 million centres across the country.

What is the role of the parents in the Anganwadi system?

- In ICDS reports, parents are routinely addressed as beneficiaries, passive recipients of ration, immunisation camps, and lately, education.
- However, this is not how parents view themselves or their children.
- Education for them is a gateway to meeting their aspirations, and a pathway to social mobility so that their children can have opportunities they missed out on.
- Enrolment rates for primary school reaching over 90% are a direct consequence of the link in parents' minds that education leads to opportunities for a better life.

What had led to the downfall of the Anganwadi System?

- Several surveys that conducted repeatedly with rural and urban parents of 3-6 year old children.
- It was found that, 80% of the parents considered that the best pathway for social mobility for their children is through education via learning English (speaking and writing) and math skills.
- The Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) curricula for different States instead focus on local language-driven, and play-based pedagogy.
- Anganwadi systems, with the best of intentions, do not fulfil parents' demands.
- The Anganwadi system, is not willing to work in line with the parent's wish to educate their children in English language.

- By ignoring or belittling parents' aspirations and demands, the system has pushed the parents to leave the Anganwadi system.

What is the importance of language in the Anganwadi system?

- The system should work towards supporting the children of the Anganwadis, by giving importance to the parent's expressed needs for English language skills, writing, and maths, for their children.
- This can be done in easy ways
 - Exposing children to the English language at an early age in an age appropriate, non-intimidating way.
 - Recognising that the language spoken at home is the best way to reach fluency in any other language.
- Giving children a pencil to scribble for a few minutes a day, of course without making them write letters and numbers endlessly, is a great way to support fine motor skills and later writing.
- Maths could be made simple by exhibiting the wonder of maths through fun activities like estimation, comparison, sorting, and seriation.
- This helps reduce the fear and paralysis of maths that gets in their way of succeeding in STEM in later years.

What is the way forward?

- Anganwadi centres can follow regular daily schedules that balance time spent on self-directed free play and teacher-led activities focused on developing cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills.
- They can also conduct regular Shiksha Choupals (parent - teacher meetings) to showcase the learning happening in the Anganwadi to the parent community to bolster their trust in this institution.
- A mass campaign for awareness of age appropriate ECCE that brings parents in as stakeholders, is crucial in the next five years.
- In the ECCE ecosystem, it is necessary to embrace the power of 'abhibhavaak-bhagidari' (participation of parents) to activate Anganwadi 2.0.

Reference

1. <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/not-centres-of-learning-yet/article65799804.ece>
2. <http://icds-wcd.nic.in/icds.aspx>