

Opinion | The learning crisis underlying our unemployment challenge

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Much of India's workforce lacks the basic education necessary to acquire job skills and anganwadis can help address this

Topics

Employment Crisis

It may be difficult to imagine that the humble “*anganwadi*”, the grassroots institution at the base of the Integrated Child Development Services scheme (ICDS), could have any role in addressing India's formidable challenge of unemployment. However, two recent studies, *Employment In India* (Oxford University Press, 2019) by Ajit Ghosh and the *Annual Status Of Employment Report 2019* (ASER 2019) released earlier this week, together establish a clear causal link between early learning among children in India's vast network of 1.2 million anganwadis and employment outcomes in the labour market over the long term.

Using data from the NSS Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report for 2017-18, Ghosh, a leading authority on India's employment situation, estimates that there is a total backlog of some 79 million surplus plus openly unemployed workers. In addition, some 7-9 million new workers join the labour force each year. To employ all the new workers and absorb the backlog over, say, the next 15 years, productive employment would have to grow by about 13 million persons per year. Instead, employment has actually been declining by 0.5%, or about 2-3 million persons per year.

Ghosh further points out that such employment growth as exists, mainly in the formal sector of the economy, requires at least a modest level of skills. The opportunity for unskilled work in the informal sector has been shrinking. However, most of those looking for work are mainly unskilled workers. India's record in this regard is abysmal. Only 5% of the workforce has any skill training, and a mere 2% actually have a formally certified skill as compared to 70% in advanced European

countries and 80% to 90% in East Asian countries like Japan and Korea. A report by the Confederation of Indian Industry indicated that only 40% of those looking for work were actually employable in skilled jobs.

Clearly, apart from macroeconomic policies to revive growth on the demand side, what the employment challenge requires is a massive and effective skilling programme on the supply side of the labour market. Indeed, the government has several skilling initiatives in place, especially the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) launched in 2015 to train some 400 million workers in the 15-45 age group over a seven-year period. The performance of PMKVY has, however, been very disappointing. In a report to a parliamentary committee in 2016, the government pointed out that of the 1.76 million who had been trained until then, only 580,000 could be certified as having successfully completed the training and only 82,000 could actually be placed in jobs.

No skilling programme, however ambitious and well designed, can succeed unless it is rooted in a sound foundation of basic education. India's distorted, upside-down education policy always had a strong bias in favour of higher education. At the basic education level, its emphasis was on achieving high enrolment targets—quantity rather than quality—especially after the Right to Education (RTE) Act came into force. Net primary enrolment is now over 92% and secondary enrolment is also around 75%. However, scant attention was paid to learning outcomes. Consequently, Indian students who participated in the global Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) test in 2008 were ranked near the bottom, at 43rd and 47th out of 49 countries. In 2009, students from Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh, two high performing states in education, participated in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and were again ranked near the bottom at 72nd and 73rd out of 74. India subsequently withdrew from such international tests, claiming these were West-oriented. But the fact is that Asian students from Singapore, Korea, Japan, etc., routinely top these tests.

Within India, ASER reports since 2005 have tracked learning outcomes using simple tests for reading and arithmetic skills. The reports showed that learning outcomes were not only extremely poor, but even deteriorating until the RTE itself was

amended to take cognisance of the learning crisis. Earlier ASER reports have also documented how the learning deficit gets compounded as children progress from lower to higher grades, making it increasingly difficult for them to cope, often driving them to give up and drop out. This problem of a compounding learning deficit undermining the foundation for skilling and subsequent productive employment starts early with a deficit in foundational skills. The new Draft Education Policy 2019 notes that nearly 50 million children in elementary school lack the necessary foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

ASER 2019 focuses on these early years of learning and points out that a learning deficit can begin at the very outset if a child is forced into regular schooling at grade 1, without proper preparation in developing cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills at the pre-school stage. This is observed more frequently in poorer households sending their children to government schools. The report emphasizes the importance of leveraging the existing vast but poor-quality anganwadi network as pre-schools, and strengthening them to implement appropriate school readiness activities for 3- and 4-year-olds.

These foundational skills are essential to equip the child for sound learning as she progresses through school, eventually graduating and subsequently acquiring the higher skills necessary for decent productive employment.

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