

# Marketization of ECCE and the Reproduction of Caste-based Inequities in India: evidence and policy implications

Research has established the positive impacts of strong early learning environments and institutional contexts in tackling inter-generational inequality. ECCE is viewed as a means to counter the adverse long term effects of poverty and deprivation. To this end, policy advocates improving access to quality ECCE. Little attention, however, has been paid to how pervasive social realities such as caste and marketization profoundly shape unequal ECCE outcomes in developing contexts such as India. Our ethnographic study on ECCE in Bihar highlights how casteism, state inaction, and marketization combine to exacerbate social and educational inequalities in early childhood. The study draws attention to child development as not just a psychological, but also a social process. Policy implications are drawn from this, to address persistent caste-based and economic inequalities in early childhood.



## ECCE in India

- The state is the largest provider of ECCE, and offers a universal and fee-free programme, covering areas of health, nutrition and preschool educational services. However, this caters only to half the population between 0-6 years.
- The private sector is the second largest provider of ECCE. It caters to families with the purchasing power to invest early in formal learning, to secure a head-start for their children. Private ECCE provisions are of varied types, costs and quality.
- Differential availability and access to ECCE provisioning has created a stratified ECCE market, mirroring trends in elementary education.
- The new draft National Education Policy 2019 (dNEP) has proposed important changes such as extending the mandatory Right to Education to the 3-6 age group and expanding ECCE up to 8 years to ensure stronger foundational learning. However, issues of marketization of ECCE and reproduction of inequities remain unaddressed.

## Key findings from the study

- Wide differences are present between available institutional ECCE provisions.
- State ECCE institutions are mostly dysfunctional, marked by casteism, and are accessed by the most disadvantaged families.
- A large unregulated market of ECCE services is also available, catering to economically better off families and dominant castes. These institutions are 'school like', with developmentally inappropriate practices.
- Parents see the 'downward extension' of schooling into ECCE as a necessity, and the only avenue to achieve educational and social mobility.



Table 1: Child development indicators in Bihar and India.

Indicator	Bihar				India
	SC	ST	OBC	Others	
Infant Mortality Rate	60	47	47	35	41
Under 5 Mortality Rate	73	53	56	45	50
Percentage of children under age 5 who are underweight	51	47	44	33	36
Percentage of children aged 5-59 months with anaemia	67	68	62	61	59
Preschool attendance rate	59.8				69.4
Child Development Index	0.296				0.530

### Research Background

The research was based in Korha block in the state of Bihar. The state's poor performance on social and economic outcomes is also reflected in child development indicators (CDI) for the state, as can be seen in Table 1. The CDIs further reveal the stark disparities among different social groups with Scheduled Castes (SC) and Schedule Tribes (ST) faring much worse than Other Backwards Classes (OBC) and other (forward) castes.

Sources: Census 2011; NFHS 4; RSOC 2013-14; Dreze and Khera, 2015

Gajwa\* village, the site of our study, had a sizeable population of socio-economically marginalized populations (Table 2). Upper caste (Bhumihar, Rajputs), OBCs (Poddar, Bhagat) and a few minority (Muslim) families formed the dominant landowning groups, exercising considerable social and economic power. SCs (Mushahar, Pasi, Turi, Dom) and STs (Santhal) were largely engaged in agricultural labour, and had visibly poorer access to state institutions. In light of these differences, the research examined how families negotiated ECCE for their children.

Table 2: SC/ST populations in Bihar and Gajwa

Population (%age)	SC	ST
Bihar	16%	1.3%
Gajwa	42%	10%

Source: Census 2011



### State categorization of social groups

- Scheduled Castes (SC) is the official category for caste groups that traditionally occupied the lowest position in the Indian caste structure. Scheduled Tribes (ST) denote indigenous populations. SCs and STs have faced a history of discrimination and isolation, and continue to be socio-economically marginalized.
- Other Backward Classes (OBC) are middle-castes that have been recognized by the state as educationally and socially disadvantaged.
- Muslims are officially designated as one of the religious Minorities, under which some specific sections are also identified as OBCs in a few Indian states.
- SCs, STs and OBCs have been identified for various kinds of affirmative action within state policies.
- Among these groups, access to socio-economic benefits, educational and employment opportunities, and political representation is varied, though these groups largely remain under-represented.

### Research Methods

The study adopted an ethnographic approach, with six months of in-depth, immersive field work. The research focused on three state ECCE (anganwadi) centres and one low fee private school, which were the main ECCE providers for the village. Daily observations and informal interactions were undertaken at these centres and within the community including interviews with parents, ICDS workers, state officials, school teachers, and focus group discussions with community members. This helped to build a rich and detailed account of the social life of the village, the functioning of ECCE institutions and family perceptions of ECCE. Data analysis was conducted through a process of systematic inductive coding.

\*Village name and names of people are pseudonyms

## 1. ECCE Policy must attend to narrowing of opportunities emerging from caste relations, unaccountable state institutions and poor quality private institutions

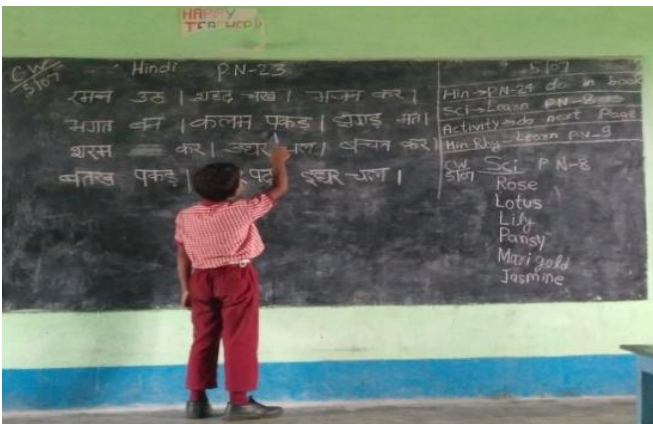
### State ECCE centres reinforce caste relations seen in the community, and are largely dysfunctional

The three ICDS centres observed were non-functional - often shut, with erratic food provisioning and almost no preschool activities taking place. Relationships between anganwadi workers, state officials, children and families were strongly determined by their respective caste-positions. Anganwadis were mainly accessed by Mushahar or Santhali children. Viewing these communities as 'dirty', dominant caste parents did not send their children to these centres. Upper caste anganwadi helpers refused to collect children from lower caste settlements and bring them to the centres, and expected lower caste children to fetch water and clean the centres, considering these tasks beneath their caste position. Mechanisms to hold centre staff and state officials accountable for ECCE provisions also failed due to the strong adherence to social and caste hierarchies.



### Developmentally inappropriate, low quality private ECCE was seen as more accountable by parents

Private preschools lacked basic infrastructure and facilities, having overcrowded classrooms with up to forty five children. Children from pre-nursery classes onwards were seated on rows of benches and desks inappropriate for their heights, and spent long hours on rote learning alphabets, numbers and rhymes. Outdoor play or play-based activities were not a part of the timetable. Fear and corporal punishment were frequently used to discipline children. Privately run tuition classes by local youth, practising similar patterns of teaching, were also available in Gajwa. Parents preferred these institutions to anganwadi centres for the symbols of teaching-learning and markers of accountability they offered in the form of books, diaries, uniform and homework.



## 2. Differential access to social and cultural capital through ECCE institutions informs parental decision making

Only landowning and upper caste families with economic resources were able to afford private pre-schooling, while those with minimal purchasing power depended on the more affordable private tuitions, or the inexpensive market for educational resources such as alphabet and number books. The most marginalised communities relied on the anganwadis, while some such as the Doms were unable to access even these. With access to ECCE institutions determined by socio-economic factors, these became sites that reinforced patterns of caste and class stratification.

*"After all, the provisions and conveniences which are offered there, if brought to the anganwadi, would be so good. And then we would not have to spend so much money to send our children to private schools"* – Gajwa panchayat member

*"We sent our children but the master shoo-ed them away saying they will not accept them in torn clothes"* – A Mushahar mother

*"[...] children from well off households are not even 3 by the time they start studying in LKG, UKG or nursery"* – Asha Devi, local ICDS official

*“Once they have gotten rid of the habit of Santhal dharm [way of life], children can get educated well [...] If you teach using Hindu dharm, then the child will get educated”- Sohan Soren, a Santhal father*

*“[...] the more time he spends in school and tuition, the more time he will be away from children in the village who don't go to school”  
-Kamala, from the Khushwaha (OBC) community*

With differentiated access, private ECCE became sites not only to provide a competitive head start for educational success, but also for social mobility and status. They were viewed as avenues towards acquiring ‘naya sanskaar’ or ‘new cultures’ which included learning ‘achese uthna, baithna aur bolna’ (implying respectable languages and behaviours of the middle classes). Dominant caste families sought to separate their children from the village environment and people, who were considered ‘illiterate’ or ‘backward’. Many lower caste families internalized notions of inferiority, reinforcing caste and class based hierarchies. Private ECCE institutions were seen to provide the cultural capital desired by both.

### 3. Marketization, and parental anxieties and expectations of ECCE, reinforce each other

#### Parental understanding of ECCE

Under immense pressure to secure early education, parents considered the downward extension of rigid routinized schooling and strict disciplining as the only valid form of ECCE. Anganwadi centres that are planned to offer a more developmentally appropriate curriculum were seen as ‘time pass’ with no real education. Parents thus invested heavily in private ECCE, some spending up to half their incomes on early education, and others sending children as young as five years old away to boarding hostels.

*“[investing in private education] is necessary, for instance one earns 10 rupees, spends 5 rupees, saves 5 rupees and uses that to maintain finances” - Manish Bhagat, OBC father*

#### Marketization of ECCE and undermining of quality provisioning

Capitalizing on parental insecurities, markets for ECCE in the form of private preschools and private tutoring were proliferating at a rapid pace, however with little regard for any norms for quality. Parents were viewed as customers for profit oriented models of schooling, with schools offering attractive schemes to enrol children – such as suspension of fee for the first few months. But later they also adopted exploitative practices such as forming a nexus amongst themselves to prevent children who were unable to pay the fee from moving to another school.

## Policy Implications

To address the reproduction of inequalities, ECCE policy must attend to how casteism and marketization shape differential access to various institutional forms of ECCE. Creation of parity within both state and private institutions must be brought about through adoption of similar curricular and pedagogic standards.

#### Strengthening State Institutions

- Attend to parental expectations and strengthen early literacy component of ECCE.
- Improve accountability mechanisms by enabling parental monitoring committees such as anganwadi balvikas samitis. This requires community mobilization and awareness of community rights and entitlements
- Encourage participation of a diversity of communities in anganwadi centres by bringing in neighbourhood ECCE centre norms.

#### Regulating private services

- Tighter regulation of developmentally inappropriate practices such as rote learning and excessive focus on formal literacy, and ensuring private schools adopt holistic early development programmes.
- Develop financial norms with ceilings, that allow for a diversity of communities to participate within private institutions.

#### Project Details

This policy brief was prepared by R.Maithreyi<sup>1</sup>, Ketaki Prabha<sup>1</sup> and Arathi Sriprakash<sup>2</sup>. Insights presented are drawn from a British Academy funded study on ‘Examining Contexts, Costs and Practices of Early Childhood Care and Education in India’, undertaken by CBPS and University of Cambridge.

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