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Early Investment in Children, the Key to India's Future

Context

- India's aspiration to become a developed ('Viksit') nation and a **\$30 trillion economy** by 2047 has become a defining narrative in contemporary public discourse.
- While this vision is both desirable and attainable, it cannot be realised solely through investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, and digital innovation.
- Developmental transitions historically succeed when nations prioritise **human capital formation** as much as physical capital.
- In India, however, one critical dimension of human development remains under-recognised: **Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)**.
- Far from being a welfare concern, ECCD represents a strategic economic investment with long-term implications for productivity, equity and national competitiveness.

The Importance of the Early Years

- Scientific evidence highlights the **first 1,000 days** of life, from conception to age two, as the period during which up to 85% of brain development and most neural connections are formed.
- Extending this window to eight years totals roughly 3,000 days, during which foundational cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural capacities take shape.
- Children who receive adequate nutrition, responsive care and cognitive stimulation during this period are more likely to complete schooling, acquire skills and contribute productively as adults.
- At a macro level, such cohorts reduce future public expenditure on healthcare and remedial education and expand the taxable workforce, demonstrating that ECCD generates durable, intergenerational returns.

India's Progress and Remaining Gaps

- India's own experience in child health illustrates the power of sustained investment.
- Over the past decades, programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the **Child Survival** and Safe Motherhood initiative and the National Health Mission significantly reduced infant and child mortality and improved immunisation and nutrition outcomes.
- However, these efforts largely targeted survival, not developmental potential. Moreover, ECCD interventions have predominantly focused on low-income households.

- This targeted approach overlooks developmental challenges increasingly observed in middle- and upper-income families, including obesity, digital overexposure, reduced physical activity and delayed socio-emotional skills.
- **Developmental risk** is therefore more universal than assumed.

The Case for Early and Integrated Interventions

- Advances in neuroscience and epigenetics reinforce the need for interventions earlier than current policy frameworks provide.
- **Parental nutrition**, mental health, substance use and environmental exposures even before conception can affect gene expression and long-term health outcomes.
- Yet, formal support systems typically begin only around age three through Anganwadi centres or private preschools, well after the most critical developmental window has passed.
- The absence of parental support for responsive caregiving, stimulation and emotional bonding during the first 1,000 days represents a significant policy blind spot.
- To address these gaps, India must transition from fragmented programmes to an integrated ECCD framework that spans preconception to eight years of age.
- Key components include structured preconception counselling, nationwide parental education, growth and developmental milestone monitoring, quality early learning systems for children aged two to five, and collaboration across health, nutrition and education sectors.
- Schools, given their institutional reach, can evolve into holistic hubs for learning, nutrition and well-being rather than merely instructional spaces.

The Way Forward: Towards a Societal and Policy Movement

- Realising such a transformation requires both state action and **societal ownership**. ECCD must become a **subject of public conversation** within homes, communities, workplaces and schools.
- Non-profit organisations, philanthropic institutions and the private sector can play critical roles in shaping ecosystems of care and learning.
- At the governmental level, **effective coordination among ministries**, including Health, Education and Women and Child Development, is essential.
- A dedicated inter-ministerial mission on ECCD could formalise responsibilities, streamline investments and ensure continuity across election and policy cycles.

Conclusion

- India's **long-term developmental trajectory** will depend less on what it promises its children and more on what it invests in them during their earliest years.
- ECCD is not an optional add-on to India's growth strategy; it is its foundation.
- The health, skills and productivity of future generations will ultimately determine whether India's ambitions of becoming a developed nation are realised.
- A **citizen-led movement for early childhood development**, backed by robust policy and institutional frameworks, may prove to be the missing link in India's journey towards inclusive and sustainable prosperity.

Early Investment in Children, the Key to India's Future FAQs

Q1. What is the central argument of the analysis?

Ans. The analysis argues that early childhood care and development is a foundational investment for India's long-term economic and social development.

Q2. Why are the first 3,000 days of life important?

Ans. They are important because most brain development, cognitive growth and emotional regulation are shaped during this period.

Q3. What major gap exists in India's current child-related programmes?

Ans. The major gap is that programmes focus on child survival rather than on enabling full developmental potential.

Q4. Why should ECCD be universal and not limited to poor households?

Ans. It should be universal because developmental risks such as obesity, screen addiction and social delays are increasingly seen across all income groups.

Q5. What broader changes are suggested to improve ECCD in India?

Ans. The analysis suggests adopting an integrated framework, coordinating ministries and creating a societal movement to support children's development.

Source: **The Hindu**

The New Grammar of Indian Elections - Media, Misinformation and Manipulation

Context

- With elections due in four States and one Union Territory in about 10 weeks, India's electoral landscape is once again witnessing the **fusion** of politics, media, and technology.
- From WhatsApp-driven mobilisation (2019) to digital-forward campaigns (2024), Indian elections are **evolving rapidly**.
- While 2029 is predicted to be the "**AI election**", the 2026 elections reflect a hybrid ecosystem—a mix of traditional media, social media, influencers, and artificial intelligence.
- This raises **serious concerns** about fake news, influencer politics, and deepfakes, with implications for electoral integrity and democratic accountability.

Changing Media-Politics Interface in India

- Campaigns now extend beyond rallies to reels, podcasts, jingles, AI-generated calls, and algorithm-driven content.

- Votes are cast offline, but **perceptions** are shaped online, making digital platforms the primary battleground.

Fake News - A Structural Feature of Elections

- **What is fake news:**
 - While there is no legal definition of fake news in India, Australia's eSafety Commissioner defines it as "fictional news stories made up to support certain agendas".
 - It is often described as "**yellow journalism** on steroids", amplified by algorithms.
- **Why it matters in elections:**
 - Fake news directly impacts voter perception, polarisation, and trust in institutions.
 - With over 90 crore internet users in India in 2025, influencing perception and shaping narratives has become possible with just a few clicks.
 - **For example**, a study by the Indian School of Business and CyberPeace revealed that 46% of all fake news was political in nature.
- **Who is affected:** 3 out of 5 Indians access news online. A Pew Research Centre study of 2025 found that 65% of those surveyed viewed made-up news and information as a huge concern, among the highest globally.
- **When does it peak:** During elections – NCRB recorded a 70% rise in fake news cases in 2019, an election year.
- **Where does it spread:**
 - Social media and messaging platforms – WhatsApp, X, Facebook, Instagram.
 - AI-generated visuals, doctored videos, synthetic clips blur fact and fiction. Algorithms provide virality without accountability.

Media Consumption Patterns - Digital Dominance

- India has close to 900 private television channels, and nearly half of them are news channels. Television still has a deep reach — 23 crore homes own a TV set.
- However, **shift** to digital is decisive –
 - 7 in 10 Indians prefer online news (Reuters Institute).
 - News sources – YouTube (55%), WhatsApp (46%), Instagram (37%), and Facebook (36%).
- Even with these media consumption patterns, newspapers, both in regional languages and English, still remain comparatively high on the credibility quotient.

Influencers - The New Political Intermediaries

- Influencers wield significant **agenda-setting** power, backed by professional research and production teams.
- **Gen Z trends:** Only 13% follow celebrities, 86% prefer influencers.
- **Political outreach:**
 - Senior politicians and parties actively engage influencers. Union Government empanelled influencer agencies via MyGov (2023).

- There are concerns over **political bias**, as at least one empanelled agency's leadership openly supports the ruling dispensation.

Deepfakes - AI as a Political Weapon

- **Nature of the threat:** Digitally altered or AI-generated videos and audio impersonating leaders and celebrities. **For example,**
 - Deceased political leaders “addressing” meetings.
 - Film actors criticising or endorsing political parties.
- **Scale of the problem:**
 - In the 60 days before the last Lok Sabha elections 5 crore AI-generated calls were made to voters using synthetic voices.
 - Meta approved 14 AI-generated ads inciting violence against Muslims and an opposition leader.
- **Institutional failure:**
 - The Election Commission of India (ECI), as a constitutional authority under **Article 324**, should regulate electoral communication.
 - However, weak implementation capacity (e.g., recent SIR process) raises doubts about its preparedness to handle AI-driven misinformation.

Challenges and Way Ahead

- **Absence of a legal definition of fake news:** Legal clarity – define fake news and deepfakes within electoral and IT laws.
- **Algorithmic amplification without transparency:** Platform accountability – Algorithmic transparency, faster takedown mechanisms during election periods.
- **Lack of robust regulation of political influencers:** ECI-led regulatory framework mandatory disclosure of AI-generated political content, clear guidelines for influencers and political advertising.
- **Rapid proliferation of deepfakes and synthetic media:** Strengthen inter-agency coordination (ECI, MeitY, platforms, civil society).
- **Institutional inertia and regulatory gaps:** Within ECI and digital governance frameworks. Independent oversight bodies for election-time digital content moderation.
- **Threats:** To free and fair elections, voter autonomy, and democratic trust. Digital literacy and media awareness campaigns for voters.

Conclusion

- Indian elections are entering a phase where technology is no longer just an **enabler** but a **disruptor** of democracy.
- Fake news, influencers, and deepfakes have become structural features of electoral politics, challenging the foundations of free, fair, and informed choice.
- As India moves towards an AI-driven electoral future, **institutional preparedness**, regulatory foresight, and citizen awareness will determine whether technology strengthens democracy or subverts it.

- For the world's largest democracy, the credibility of elections is inseparable from the credibility of information.

The New Grammar of Indian Elections FAQs

Q1. How has the rise of digital media transformed the nature of electoral campaigns in India?

Ans. It has shifted elections from physical mobilisation to perception management through algorithms, influencers, etc.

Q2. Why is fake news described as a 'structural feature' of contemporary Indian elections?

Ans. Because political misinformation peaks during elections and systematically influences voter behaviour via online platforms.

Q3. What is the role of social media influencers in India's electoral politics?

Ans. Influencers act as new political intermediaries shaping public opinion, especially among Gen Z.

Q4. What makes deepfakes a serious threat to free and fair elections in India?

Ans. Deepfakes undermine electoral integrity by using AI-generated audio-visual content to impersonate leaders, mislead voters.

Q5. Why is stronger regulation by the ECI required in the digital electoral ecosystem?

Ans. Because existing frameworks are inadequate to address AI-driven misinformation, influencer marketing.

Source: **IE**

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