

Structural reforms have changed the social sector

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As the world's largest democracy goes through its election process, it's important to take a step back to maintain a clear line of vision on what is of key importance: the ease of living and access to satisfaction of our citizens. A series of structural reforms have transformed India's social sector. One of India's biggest challenges continues to be the state of our social capital. The systematic modus operandi has been to move away from a macro policy, and, instead, to address the grassroots needs, leveraging massive advances in e-governance and ICT tools.

Nutrition has traditionally been ignored despite daunting challenges. According to a National Family Health Survey (NFHS4), nearly one in every three children is stunted and every other woman is anaemic. The recently launched POSHAN Abhiyaan is an overarching umbrella scheme that brings together a comprehensive package of intervention and services focused on the vital 1,000 days of a child's life delivered by multiple ministries through a governance structure that fosters sectoral convergence. The POSHAN Abhiyaan further ideates a Jan Andolan through involvement of local communities to push for a Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC), since focusing on the supply side without convincing families of the need to avail of the required services would yield diminishing returns to government investments. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana is a conditional cash transfer scheme for pregnant mothers and lactating women that would reinforce the SBCC strategy. The beneficiary cost norms of the supplementary nutrition programme under the Integrated Child Development Services has been revised upwards, and indexed to inflation so that the entitlement in real terms remains impactful. Mission Indradhanush has

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ensured that in the lowest quintile 201 districts, full immunisation coverage rates have increased well over 10 times.

The Ayushman Bharat scheme has transformed India's health care. In 200 days, 20 lakh patients have received insurance treatment worth more than ₹2,600 crore, with more than 30 million e-cards having been generated. These are staggering figures.

Providing high quality education remains a mammoth task. An Ernst & Young study on higher education points out that by 2030, India will be the youngest country in the world, with 14 crore individuals of college-going age. World class education remains one of our biggest challenges. There have been key outcomes in the sector. The categorisation of universities for graded autonomy has been initiated with well-performing universities so that they can be awarded various dimensions of academic, administrative and financial autonomy. Another outcome is the strengthening of the accreditation framework, which enables additional agencies to be empaneled by an independent Accreditation Advisory Council (AAC). All accreditation reports must be made public online for transparency.

In schools, states have successfully synchronised academic initiatives with administrative reforms. The Aayog has also developed the state-level School Education Quality Index which seeks to make improvements in learning outcomes a focal point of governance by ranking states.

A lot of work is happening on introducing innovation to education through ICT so as to reach the farthest corners of India, and this sector is a key one for growth in the next 10 years. A unique example is of Banka District of Bihar which has utilised mobile telephony to spread education in schools.

The Aspirational Districts Programme was formed to address the development needs and transform 115 districts across 28 states that require the most progress on various development parameters. These districts account for more than 20% of India's population and cover over 8,600 gram panchayats. The programme's emphasis is on improving districts on 49 indicators across five core indicators: education; health and nutrition; financial inclusion; agriculture; skill development; and basic infrastructure. It is based on real-time data, constant monitoring and is a collaborative project between the Central and state governments in partnership with philanthropic foundations and civil society. The main attempt is to prioritise resources, concentrate efforts, address governance and capacity bottlenecks in order to accelerate the pace of change in the human development indicators.

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The views expressed are personal.