



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Business Administration

ADVANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ODISHA: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, TRIBAL INNOVATIONS, AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

KEY WORDS: Early Childhood Care And Education, Anganwadi Centres, Odisha, Nua Arunima, Tribal Education, Mother-tongue Education, Nep 2020, Foundational Learning

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has moved from the margins of education policy to the centre of India's foundational learning agenda. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 conceptualizes the period from age three to eight as the foundational stage and calls for play-based, developmentally appropriate, multilingual, and inclusive learning. For Odisha, this transition is particularly significant because ECCE must respond simultaneously to poverty, geographical disadvantage, institutional capacity constraints, and considerable linguistic and cultural diversity. This article examines Odisha's ECCE reforms through three interconnected lenses: policy implementation, the institutional role of Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), and mother-tongue-based innovation for tribal children. Particular attention is given to Nua Arunima, Odisha's contextualized ECCE curriculum developed initially in ten tribal languages. Drawing on policy documents, evaluation evidence, and the wider literature on early childhood development and multilingual education, the article argues that Odisha's principal challenge is no longer policy recognition but implementation capacity. Nua Arunima demonstrates how culturally responsive pedagogy can address linguistic exclusion, but its long-term effectiveness depends on teacher capability, infrastructure, community participation, and sustained institutional support. The article concludes that equitable ECCE requires Odisha to move from a curriculum-centred reform model towards an integrated system of quality improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of early childhood education rests on more than the familiar proposition that "children learn quickly" in their early years. Developmental science shows that early experiences interact with biological, social, emotional, and environmental factors to influence later learning and well-being (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The World Health Organization, UNICEF, and World Bank consequently frame early childhood development as an integrated process requiring health, nutrition, security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for early learning (World Health Organization et al., 2018).

India's policy architecture increasingly reflects this understanding. The NEP 2020 places ECCE at the foundation of the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure and calls for universal access to quality ECCE by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) subsequently translated this ambition into a developmentally appropriate framework emphasizing play, activity, interaction, language, and holistic development (NCERT, 2022).

Odisha provides an important setting in which to examine how such national ambitions are translated into practice. Its substantial tribal population and linguistic diversity make a standardized, one-language approach to preschool education problematic. The state's experience therefore raises a broader question: **Can national ECCE reforms achieve equity without being sufficiently adapted to local linguistic, cultural, and institutional realities?**

ECCE in India: From Access to Quality

The ICDS network has given India an exceptionally extensive platform for delivering integrated services to young children. Yet access to an Anganwadi does not necessarily mean access to high-quality early learning. Rao et al. (2021) identify persistent challenges involving teacher preparation, infrastructure, pedagogical quality, and inequitable access. Similar concerns emerge from the India Early Childhood Education Impact Study, which found substantial variation in

preschool experiences and demonstrated the importance of the quality of children's learning environments for later outcomes (UNICEF, 2019).

This distinction between **provision and quality** is central to understanding Odisha. An AWC may successfully deliver supplementary nutrition and basic health services while offering relatively limited opportunities for sustained interaction, language development, exploration, or play. The NCF-FS itself acknowledges that the educational component of Anganwadi provision has historically been constrained by limited time and teacher capacity (NCERT, 2022).

Consequently, the policy problem is not simply one of increasing enrolment or expanding infrastructure. It is a question of building a system in which frontline workers can consistently translate ECCE principles into meaningful interactions with children.

Odisha's Policy Response

Odisha has developed a relatively substantial ECCE resource base through its Women and Child Development Department, including *Nua Arunima* materials, practitioner handbooks, parent resources, and teaching-learning materials (Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Odisha, n.d.).

The state's approach increasingly reflects the integrated conception of early childhood development promoted by international research. ECCE is linked not only with preschool learning but also with nutrition, health, parenting, community participation, and school readiness.

The introduction of *Balvatika* and related school-readiness initiatives following NEP 2020 further strengthens the connection between preschool and primary education. The NCF-FS describes *Balvatika* as a play-based preparatory year before Grade I, while *Vidya Praveesh* is designed to support children's transition into Grade I (NCERT, 2022). The underlying policy logic is important: learning gaps should be addressed before they accumulate rather than remedied only after children enter primary school.

Nua Arunima and the Politics of Language

The most distinctive feature of Odisha's ECCE response is arguably *Nua Arunima*. Developed initially in ten tribal languages, the programme was designed to address a fundamental mismatch between the language of many tribal children and the language used within educational institutions. Government documentation reports implementation across 7,202 Anganwadi Centres covering ten tribal languages during the evaluated phase (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2021).

The rationale is supported by both educational research and linguistic rights scholarship. Pattanaik (2020), examining tribal education in Odisha, argues that the dominance of Odia in settings where children's home languages are different can create serious linguistic and educational barriers. Gandhi (2014) similarly emphasizes the role of mother-tongue education in connecting tribal children's cultural and linguistic identities with formal schooling. More broadly, Mohanty (2022) argues that the systematic neglect of Indigenous and minority languages can reproduce educational inequality.

Nua Arunima responds to this problem by incorporating familiar stories, songs, cultural practices, and local contexts into preschool learning. Its significance therefore extends beyond translation. It represents an attempt to make the **content, language, and social context of learning mutually reinforcing**.

The evaluation of the Mother Tongue-Based Early Learning and Parents+ Programme provides encouraging evidence. The programme, which operated across 7,202 AWCs, reported improvements in frontline workers' capacity to engage parents and communities and supported smoother transitions of tribal children into formal schooling (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2021). These findings suggest that culturally responsive ECCE can strengthen the relationship between educational institutions and communities.

Nevertheless, such evidence should not be interpreted as proof that mother-tongue instruction alone produces better long-term educational outcomes. Language policy operates within a wider ecosystem of teacher competence, availability of materials, transition arrangements, parental participation, and institutional support.

Implementation Gaps: The Anganwadi as the Critical Interface

The greatest vulnerability in Odisha's ECCE system lies at the point where policy encounters everyday practice. Anganwadi Workers are expected to undertake multiple responsibilities related to preschool education, nutrition, health, growth monitoring, community engagement, and administrative reporting. International and Indian reviews consistently identify workforce preparation and working conditions as important determinants of preschool quality (Rao et al., 2021).

Recent research on Anganwadi environments similarly shows that physical infrastructure, WASH facilities, safety, learning materials, and the quality of adult-child interaction cannot be treated as separate concerns (Tabassum et al., 2025). A stimulating curriculum is difficult to implement in a centre that lacks adequate space, materials, sanitation, or opportunities for play.

This creates an important implementation paradox. **The more ambitious the curriculum becomes, the greater the capability required at the frontline.** Asking workers to implement play-based, inclusive, multilingual and developmentally appropriate pedagogy without providing adequate training, mentoring, time, and materials risks creating a gap between formal policy and actual classroom practice.

Toward a Systemic Model of ECCE Quality

The evidence suggests that Odisha should resist treating ECCE reform primarily as a curriculum exercise. Three mutually reinforcing investments are required.

First, **workforce development** should move beyond episodic training towards continuous professional development, mentoring, peer learning, and classroom-based support. Second, **infrastructure investment** should focus on child-friendly spaces, WASH, play materials, and locally relevant teaching resources. Third, **linguistic and community responsiveness** should become an integral quality dimension rather than a special intervention limited to selected tribal areas.

This approach is consistent with the Nurturing Care Framework, which emphasizes coordinated action across health, nutrition, education, responsive caregiving, and protection (World Health Organization et al., 2018). It also aligns with evidence that effective early childhood systems require coherence between policy, financing, workforce development, pedagogy, and family engagement.

CONCLUSION

Odisha's ECCE experience illustrates an important transition in Indian education policy: the movement from viewing early childhood services primarily as welfare provision towards recognizing them as the foundation of educational development.

Nua Arunima is particularly significant because it demonstrates how a national commitment to foundational learning can be adapted to a multilingual and culturally diverse setting. Its importance lies not simply in using tribal languages but in recognizing children's existing linguistic and cultural resources as assets for learning.

Yet innovation at the curricular level cannot compensate indefinitely for weaknesses in implementation capacity. The future of ECCE in Odisha will depend on whether the state can strengthen the institutional ecosystem surrounding the Anganwadi Worker: infrastructure, materials, training, mentoring, manageable workloads, community participation, and stronger transitions to primary education.

The central policy lesson is therefore straightforward: **equity in ECCE requires more than giving every child access to a centre; it requires giving every child access to a high-quality learning relationship within that centre.** Odisha has made important progress in articulating this vision. The next challenge is to make its promise consistently visible in children's everyday experiences.

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