Shared Dreams, Uneven Realities: Anganwadis in Navi Mumbai's Cityscape

Vikramshila

Introduction

The Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) was launched on October 2, 1975, in 33 blocks (4 rural, 18 urban, 11 tribal) . Over the last 49 years, it has been expanded progressively, and at present, it has over 5000 projects covering several community development blocks and urban slums; over 60 million children below the age of 6, over 10 million women between 16 and 44, and 2 million lactating mothers. The total population under ICDS coverage is 70 million, approximately 7 per cent of the total population of one billion . The poor coverage of the government's flagship programme in early childhood development in urban areas was revealed in 2019 when the government's response to a Right to Information (RTI) query disclosed that for every 100 Anganwadi beneficiaries in the country, only seven are in urban areas.

The significance of the aforementioned fact grows when seen in the context of the report from the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), 'Status of Children in Urban India Baseline Study 2018' which states that India is home to 472 million children, comprising 39 per cent of its population. Every fourth child in India (27.4 per cent) lives in urban areas.

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[1]Sachdev, Y., and J. Dasgupta. "INTEGRATED CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES (ICDS) SCHEME." Medical Journal Armed Forces India, vol. 57, no. 2, Apr. 2001, pp. 139–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0377-1237(01)80135-0.

[2]ibid

[3]Chandra, Jagriti. "Only 7 in 100 Anganwadi Beneficiaries Are in Cities." The Hindu, 4 Feb. 2020, www.thehindu.com/news/national/only-7-in-100-anganwadi-beneficiaries-are-in-cities/article30736445.ece#:~:text=NITI%20Aayog's%20 draft%20working%20paper%20to%20strengthen%20the%20ICDS%20programme%20in%20urban%20areas&text=For%20every%20100%20anganwadi%20beneficiaries,programme%20in%20early%20childhood%20development.

A child's early years have a significant impact on his/her physical, social, and emotional development. For children from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds, quality early childhood care and education can play an important role in bridging gaps and improving their life chances. Moreover, quality early childhood education does not only lead to better school readiness and higher academic achievement in primary grades but also has other socio-economic benefits. For instance, it allows the participation of mothers in the workforce and frees up older children, particularly girls, from childcare, which in turn reduces dropout rates at higher grades. Therefore, there are merits in increasing public spending on early childhood care and education and empowering India's Anganwadis.

Maharashtra

As of December 2023, Maharashtra has 1,10,465 Anganwadi Centres and 1,08,507 Anganwadi workers, as per Poshan Tracker, a mobile-based application rolled out by the Ministry of Women and Child Development on March 1, 2021. As one of the most urbanized states in India, Maharashtra has 1.3 crore children in the age group of 0-6 years, with approximately 42% residing in urban areas and including a large population of inter-and intrastate migrants. However, low access to public ECE and Early Childhood Care and Education ("ECCE") centres is a persistent issue for urban Maharashtra with only 16% of the 97,475 Anganwadi Centres present in the state being located in its urban areas. Of these, only 5147 Anganwadi Centres are located in Mumbai to cater to a population of 3.08 crore people, far below the population norms of 1 Anganwadi Centre to a population of 1000 in urban areas. Recently, as many as 4,200 AWCs in the state that earlier fell under rural areas, have been notified as 'urban centres' by the state's Women and Child Development (WCD) department.

Maharashtra has several separate pre-primary systems existing side by side in the state — the Anganwadi System, Government primary schools with pre-primary sections, private players, NGOs and the Municipality run Balwadi System. The Education Department of the Municipal Corporation Greater Mumbai (MCGM) runs 819 Balwadis in its elementary schools.

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[4] Dhar, Devashish. "No Child's Play: The Enduring Challenge of Creating Child-Friendly Cities." Orfonline.Org, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION (ORF), 4 Dec. 2023, www.orfonline.org/research/no-childs-play-the-enduring-challenge-of-creating-child-friendly-cities#sdfootnote18sym.

[5] Chakrabarty, M. (2024). Are Anganwadis ready to provide quality early childhood education? Observer Research Foundation. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/are-anganwadis-ready-to-provide-quality-early-childhood-education

[6] ibid

[7] Sah, P. (2024, January 19). Maharashtra anganwadi workers' strike: 46 days of asking for more. The Hindu. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/maharashtra-anganwadi-workers-strike-46-days-of-asking-for-more/article67749179.ece

[8] Bous, K. M. (2019). Passing the Baton: Understanding the PPP Model of Pre-Primary Education in Mumbai. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620720/bp-world-bank-education-ppps-090419-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=yor

[9] Shelar, J. (2022, April 25). In a restructure, 4,200 anganwadis notified as urban centres. Hindustan Times. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/in-a-restructure-4-200-anganwadis-notified-as-urban-centres-101650894768368.html

[10] Bous, K. M. (2019). Passing the Baton: Understanding the PPP Model of Pre-Primary Education in Mumbai. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620720/bp-world-bank-education-ppps-090419-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=yor

Navi Mumbai

The current estimated population of Navi Mumbai city in 2024 is 1,589,000, while Navi Mumbai metro population is estimated at 26,129,000. There are 226 AWCs in Navi Mumbai, distributed across eight nodes in which it is divided.

Why does this document matter?

An analysis of data from 2010 to 2019 reveals a steady annual growth in migration rates [in Navi Mumbai], averaging a 5% increase in population attributed to migration. Correspondingly, the demand for housing units surged, with an estimated 8% rise in the requirement for residential spaces, outstripping the available supply by nearly 15% during this period. This imbalance manifested in elevated property prices and rents, with a visible discrepancy between affordability and availability, especially for migrant populations seeking housing.

Although urbanisation is seen as a positive change, unprecedented and unplanned urbanization can result in rapidly increasing slum areas and rising economic inequalities. Rapid urbanisation in the absence of corresponding growth of employment opportunities is regarded as the root cause of growing urban poverty and unemployment. The growth of economic opportunities in urban areas fails to keep pace with the quantum of rural-to-urban migration. Consistent massive migration from rural areas to urban areas can put greater pressure on the urban services too. Though unplanned urbanization affects everybody, it affects the urban poor and the vulnerable more.

People are forced to settle in informal settlements and overcrowded slums. People living in urban slums are particularly affected due to lack of good housing, proper sanitation, proper education and quality health care. Lack of these basic services can escalate poverty and unemployment, crime against women and children, safety problems and poor health. Rapid urbanisation puts tremendous pressure on infrastructural facilities like housing, electricity, water, transport, and employment.

In such a context, the role of urban AWCs becomes even more critical as they serve as the first line of support for young children and their families, offering essential services like nutrition, health check-ups, and early childhood education.

[11] Ghadge, A. & Patil, B.. (2023). An Impact of Migration on Urbanization Trends in Navi Mumbai: A Socio-Economic Perspective. Journal of Advanced Zoology. 44. 10.53555/jaz.v44iS8.3514.

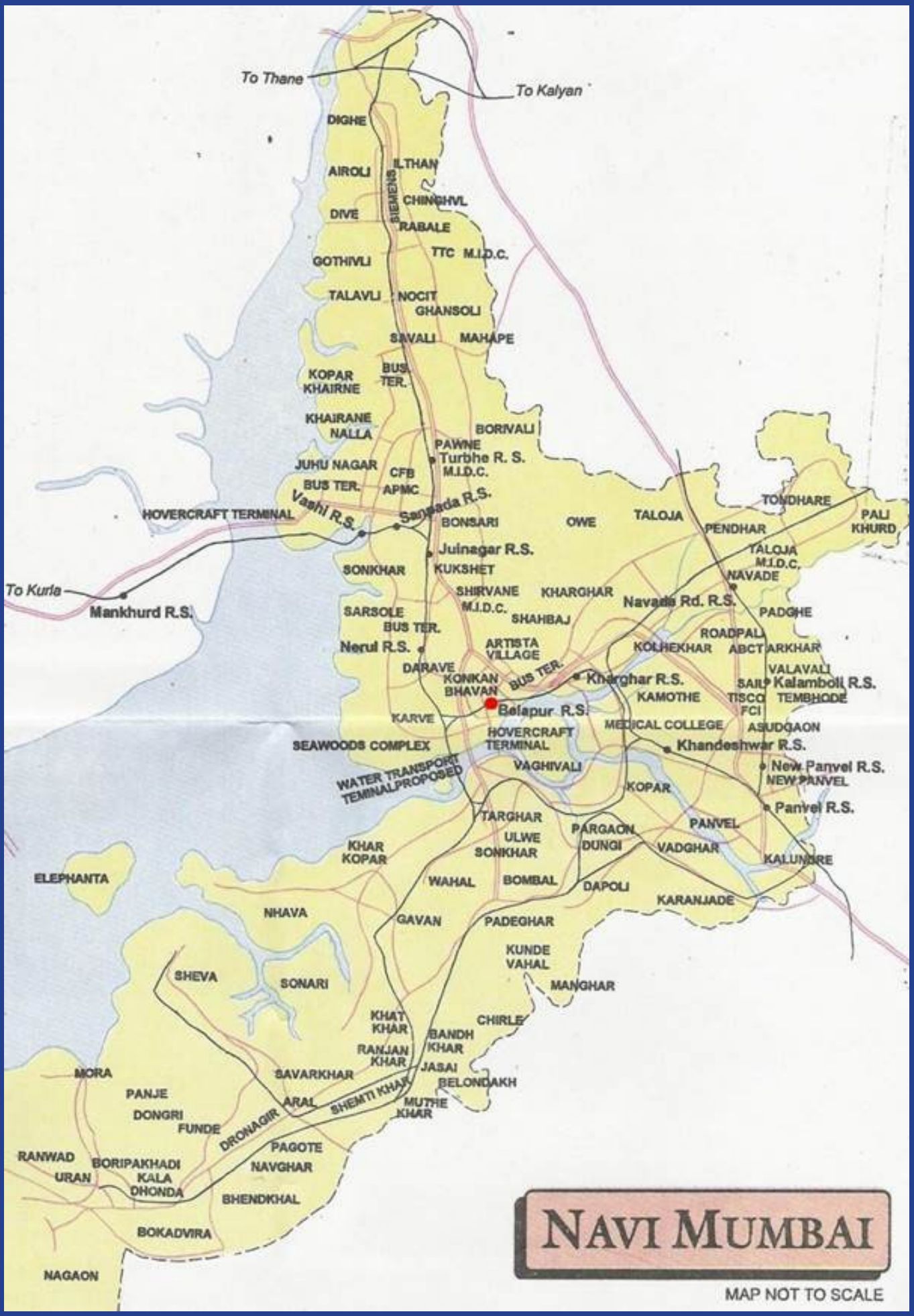
[12] Government of Maharashtra, IIPS, Mohanty, S. K., Bhagat, R. B., Dwivedi, L. K., Sharma, S., UNICEF, Jose, J., Nair, A., & Chandrasekar, R. (n.d.). Assessing Urban Vulnerabilities in Maharashtra. In Assessing Urban Vulnerabilities in Maharashtra. https://www.iipsindia.ac.in/sites/default/files/Urban_Vulnerability_Analysis_Report_121021.pdf

[13] ibid

Urban poverty exacerbates the challenges that families face in providing for their children's needs. Many low-income families, especially in slums and informal settlements, struggle to meet basic requirements such as food, healthcare, and education. In such circumstances, AWCs act as a vital safety net, providing a platform for early childhood education and care that can help bridge the gap. When these centres are well-equipped and adequately staffed, they not only provide nutritional supplements and healthcare services but also lay the foundation for children's educational development. This early intervention can significantly impact a child's future prospects, particularly in urban settings where competition for resources is intense.

Furthermore, in an urbanizing world, the physical and emotional well-being of children can often be overlooked as families are absorbed in the struggle for survival in the face of rapid growth and economic disparities. AWCs with their child-friendly environments, can offer a sense of stability and safety, where children can receive attention and care, essential for their social, emotional, and cognitive development. They can also foster important early socialization skills, preparing children for formal schooling, which is often a challenge for children coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Therefore, as urban areas continue to grow, the importance of quality urban Anganwadi Centres cannot be overstated. They are not just early childhood education centres but also hubs that provide critical support in the fight against urban poverty and its many challenges.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NAVI MUMBAI
MAP NOT TO SCALE

Insights from Visits to 72 Awcs, Conducted in April and May 2024

Infrastructure and Accessibility

Angan translates to courtyard, evoking an image of open, shared spaces integral to rural life—spaces where communities gather, and children play freely. The original vision of the Anganwadi was rooted in this concept, imagining a courtyard school as a nurturing and expansive environment. However, this vision becomes strikingly incongruous when transplanted into urban settings.

Cities, characterized by their ever-growing population, often lack adequate open spaces. Overcrowding, traffic congestion, and inadequate housing leave little room for parks, playgrounds, or well-planned community spaces. In such a context, the idea of a courtyard school feels like a distant dream. Some of the urban Anganwadi Centres we visited were operating out of cramped garages, narrow rooms, or shared spaces, where the limitations of space hindered their intended function.

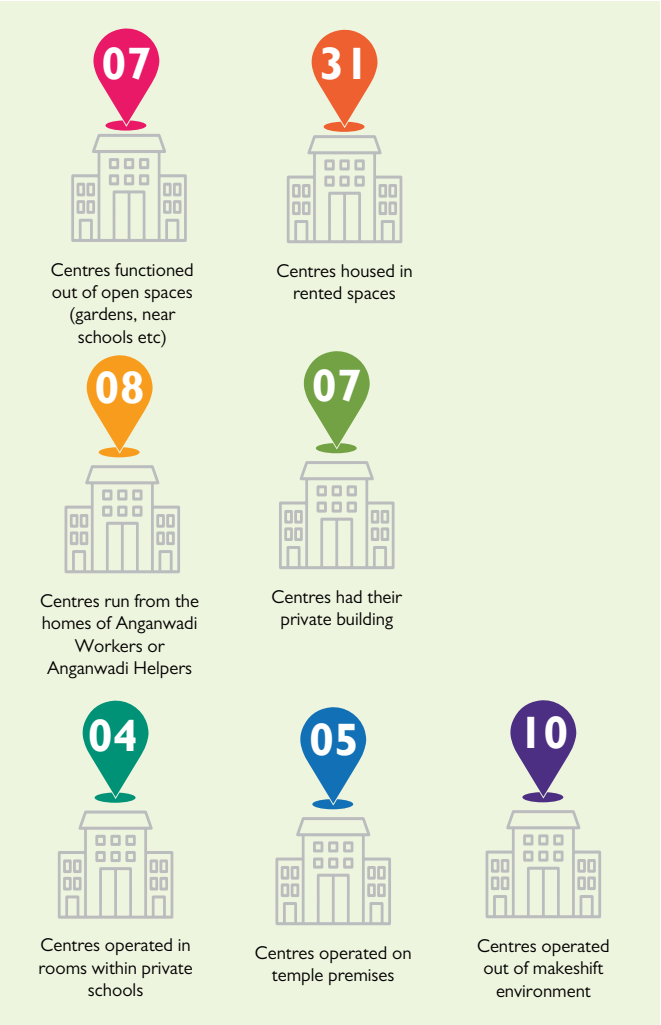
Lack of space forces a large number of children to remain restricted to a small space. A case in point is Centre 199, where not only were over 25 students playing inside a small room, but the Anganwadi Helper was away for capacity-building training, which left the AWW with the responsibility of keeping all the students engaged.

Free and open spaces are not just a luxury but a necessity for Anganwadis to function effectively. These centres are meant to be hubs of activity, offering children a place to learn, play, and grow in a safe, stimulating environment. Without adequate space, their potential is stifled, reducing the centres to mere placeholders rather than vibrant hubs of early childhood development.

Moreover, Anganwadi Centres must be child-friendly, meaning they should provide a hygienic, safe, inclusive, and accessible environment equipped with age-appropriate toys, learning materials, and amenities. These spaces are intended to foster children's physical, cognitive, and emotional development, making the environment critical to their growth and well-being. However, when these centres operate out of makeshift or improvised areas, such as balconies, private homes, or garages, they face significant limitations in meeting these standards. Our visits to over 70 Anganwadi Centres in Navi Mumbai showed that only 7 centres had their own AWC building.

Out of the 72 Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) visited, 20 were flagged for safety concerns, highlighting significant gaps in infrastructure. Many of these centres not only struggled with a lack of adequate space but also faced a critical shortage of basic facilities like toilets and drinking water. The absence of proper sanitation facilities poses a serious threat to children's health and well-being. Without functioning toilets, children are left with inadequate or unsafe alternatives, or in some cases, are unable to use the restroom when necessary, leading to health risks and discomfort. Furthermore, the lack of clean drinking water and facilities for handwashing exacerbates the risk of diseases and infections, putting the health of children at greater risk.

Another prominent aspect of some of these AWCs was the dirty, unhygienic and unlit thoroughfare that led to the centres. One of the members of the Mumbai Vikramshila Team explained that the situation worsens during rains. Here's what else was found:



What kind of spaces were AWCs functioning out of

The matter of space becomes critical when seen with the lens of child protection and safety.

The Issue of Child Protection and Safety

If a centre is situated in a poorly accessible or unsafe area—such as near busy roads, industrial zones, or isolated locations—it exposes children to various risks, including road accidents, environmental hazards, and vulnerability to exploitation or abuse. Conversely, AWCs located within safe, easily accessible, and well-monitored community spaces are better positioned to foster a protective environment for children.

The proximity of an Anganwadi to the homes of the children it serves is another critical factor in child safety. When centres are located within or near residential areas, caregivers and parents can supervise their children more effectively. This proximity minimizes the risks associated with long commutes, such as accidents or abductions.

Moreover, the location of an AWC directly affects the safety of the children as well. Centres situated in clean, well-ventilated, and non-polluted areas can help mitigate the risks of respiratory infections, waterborne diseases, and other health hazards. Conversely, Anganwadis located near dumping grounds, open drains, or industrial zones expose children to harmful pathogens and toxins, which can undermine their overall development. The availability of clean drinking water and sanitation facilities in or near the centre is also essential for maintaining good hygiene and preventing illnesses among young children.

For instance, Centre 97 at Ghansoli Gao which functions out of a garage is open to several risk factors. The centre not only lacks a toilet but is also located near a busy road. Similarly, Centre 160 is located close to several partially and fully open drains.

Safety and Space for Play

Safety was reportedly ensured in 52 centres, while 20 centres were flagged for safety concerns, indicating a significant gap in safety standards across a considerable portion of the AWCs.

45 centres had designated spaces for play, while 27 centres lacked sufficient space, which can hinder the holistic development of children who need space for physical activities and play-based learning.

What Can Be Done

Creating a prioritized list of AWCs with the most risk factors is essential to ensure effective resource allocation and meaningful intervention. These risk factors could include unsafe locations (e.g., near busy roads, industrial zones, or flood-prone areas), lack of space for play, poor sanitation facilities, or inadequate teaching and learning materials (TLMs). By systematically identifying these centres, stakeholders—including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partners—can focus their efforts where the need is greatest. When CSRs express a wish to work with AWCs in Navi Mumbai, the identified AWCs can be the first to receive help.

Clockwise: (Centres 199, 160,186 and 198)

This targeted approach prevents duplication of resources in centres that already have adequate facilities and ensures that vulnerable AWCs receive timely and appropriate support. For instance, CSR funds could be used to build boundary walls, provide age-appropriate play equipment, upgrade sanitation facilities, or supply critical teaching aids in the most disadvantaged centres. Such an intervention not only improves the quality of services but also enhances the safety and well-being of children.

Another way is the collaboration between ICDS and urban planners. The latter brings expertise in spatial analysis, land use, and community design, which can help identify optimal locations for new centres or suggest improvements for existing ones. They can assess factors such as population density, proximity to hazardous zones, availability of open spaces, and accessibility for caregivers and children. For example, urban planners can help integrate AWCs into safe community hubs like parks, schools, or residential complexes, ensuring that children have access to secure play areas and amenities. They could also help the government implement their recommendation of co-locating AWCs in primary schools.

Adding regular safety audits to the framework for improving AWCs can also ensure that these centres remain safe spaces for children. The audits could also involve local stakeholders, including community members and parents, to foster transparency and collective responsibility.

Enrolment Overview

Government Anganwadi centres in Navi Mumbai, often seen as dull and poorly maintained, are losing ground to the growing number of private pre-primary schools that have transformed early education into a more commercial and aspirational experience. Parents are drawn to the polished image of private schools, which offer colourful classrooms, better facilities, and the promise of their children learning English and wearing uniforms—symbols often associated with upward mobility. In comparison, government Anganwadi Centres appear outdated and lack the infrastructure or aesthetic appeal to match even though its curriculum is better geared towards children's development.

While private pre-primary schools may not guarantee superior education quality, their presentation and amenities overshadow the Anganwadi Centre, creating a perception of value that many parents find hard to resist. This trend has led to a dual enrolment pattern: families register their children at AWCs to take advantage of government-provided benefits, such as nutrition and health services, but send them to private schools for daily learning. Consequently, government AWCs are facing a steady decline in attendance. Here's what we found during our field visits:

- **(3-6 years):** The **72** centres had **3,953** children enrolled in the 3-6 age group, averaging **54** children per centre.
- **Only Attending Anganwadi:** Out of the enrolled children, **1,801** (approximately 46%) attended only the Anganwadi Centre (AWC) for early childhood education.
- **Children Under 3:** There were **503** children under the age of 3 across these centres, with an average of **7** children under 3 per centre.

However, the distribution of children under 3 was uneven:

- **17** centres did not have any children under 3.
- **24** centres had fewer than 10 children under 3.
- **16** centres had significantly higher numbers, ranging from 35 to 40 children under 3.

What Can Be Done

The data showing 503 children under the age of three across the AWCs in Navi Mumbai, averaging seven children per centre, underscores the reliance of parents on these centres for more than just nutritional support. Parents may see AWCs as safe spaces where young children can stay while they work, or as preparatory environments that help children get used to being in a classroom setting before transitioning to formal schooling. This indicates a latent demand for structured ECD activities at AWCs.

To meet this need, AWCs can be equipped with resources and infrastructure that support holistic early childhood development. Setting up early stimulation corners in AWCs is a practical and impactful solution. These corners could include age-appropriate toys, sensory materials, books, and interactive activities to encourage cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development. Trained AWWs can guide activities like storytelling, music sessions, and play-based learning to engage children under three and support their developmental milestones.

Moreover, the fact that 46% of the total enrolled children in the 72 centres are attending AWCs signals a significant demand for these services. This presents an opportunity to strengthen the relevance of AWCs and expand their reach. One way to do this is by analysing the operational timings of nearby private pre-primary schools. Adjusting the schedules of AWC classes to align with parental preferences or complement the timings of private schools can help retain and attract more children.

Additionally, this demand can be capitalized on by enhancing the quality of ECD services offered at AWCs. Programs focusing on school readiness, such as pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, can make AWCs indispensable for parents looking for a structured learning environment for their children. This will also ensure that AWCs remain relevant and competitive, especially in urban areas with diverse educational options.

Child-Centred Learning Environment

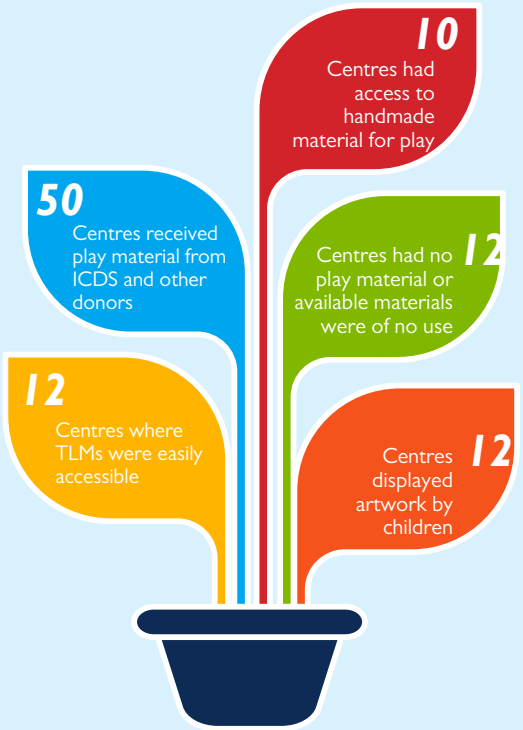
During the Vikramshila Team's visit to 72 AWCs, it was found that TLMs were organized in easily accessible corners for free play in only 12 centres. In contrast, the remaining 60 centres did not have a similar setup. Similarly, children's artwork was displayed in just 12 centres, while 60 centres did not showcase children's creations. The 72 centres collectively had 3,953 children enrolled in the 3-6 age group, averaging 54 children per centre. During the Vikramshila Team's visit, no centre had 100% attendance and despite that, the skewed space-to-children ratio was hard to miss. What else did we see:

Handmade and Donated Materials: 10 centres had access to handmade materials specifically designed for cognitive readiness, language development, and physical development.

ICDS-provided Materials: 50 centres received materials from the ICDS, although some were augmented by donated toys. However, 12 centres reported that either no materials were provided, or the materials available were not considered useful.

TLM Organization: Teaching and Learning Materials (TLM) were organized in easily accessible corners for free play in only 12 centres, whereas the remaining 60 centres did not have a similar setup, limiting children's access to these essential resources.

Children's Artwork Display: Similarly, children's artwork was displayed in just 12 centres, while 60 centres did not showcase children's creations, which is a missed opportunity for fostering creativity and celebrating children's achievements.



What Can Be Done

Play materials encourage creativity, problem-solving, and social skills while teaching and learning materials (TLMs) help build cognitive and academic abilities. These resources provide a well-rounded foundation for emotional, physical, intellectual, and social development. Hence, it could be stipulated that if attendance in a class exceeds 25% of its strength, the TLM provided could be doubled. This could ensure that every child has access to adequate learning tools thus minimizing the risk of overcrowding or resource shortages that could hinder engagement and development.

AWWs and AWHs receive capacity-building training at regular intervals. These training sessions equip them with the necessary skills to manage and nurture young children effectively. However, this effort could be bolstered further by introducing additional support systems. For instance, every time new TLM or resources are sent to AWCs, a set of "how-to" guidelines could be shared with the workers through WhatsApp. These guidelines, in the form of step-by-step instructions or short videos, would provide clear directions on how to use the materials effectively in daily activities. Such timely and accessible guidance ensures that all resources are utilized to their full potential, minimizing wastage and enhancing the learning environment for children.

Additionally, AWWs and AWHs could be trained to create low-cost or no-cost toys using easily available materials. This training would empower them to supplement the existing TLM with creative, locally-made resources, enriching the children's learning experience. For instance, they could use recycled or natural materials to make simple yet engaging toys like puppets, sensory bottles, or building blocks. These locally crafted resources not only reduce dependency on external supplies but also allow workers to tailor activities to suit the needs and preferences of the children in their care.

Another valuable approach would be to involve parents in the development of these low-cost toys. This involvement could take the form of interactive parent-child activity days, where families collaborate to create educational materials for the AWC. Parents with specific skills, such as sewing, crafting, or carpentry, could also contribute by making toys or tools that benefit the entire centre. Engaging parents in this way not only strengthens their connection with the Anganwadi but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility for their children's early education. Moreover, these activities provide parents with a deeper understanding of the role of play in early childhood development, making them more active and informed participants in their child's growth.

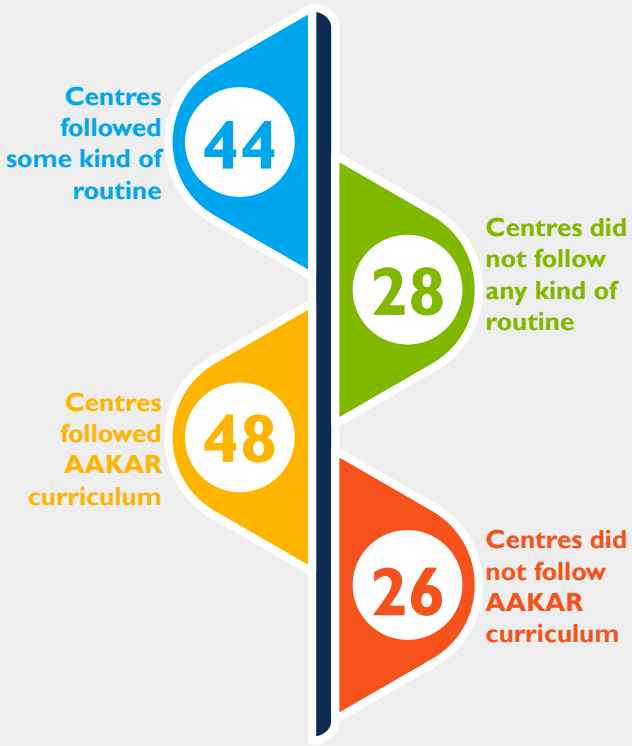
Curriculum Used at The Centres

Maharashtra introduced the "Aakar" curriculum in 2016 as part of its efforts to enhance ECCE. This curriculum aimed to provide a structured framework for early childhood education, focusing on holistic development, including cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. The introduction of "Aakaar" was aligned with national ECCE policies and sought to standardize early education across the state. This curriculum is being followed in the state across the AWCs.

In 2024 the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) released the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education 'Aadharshila,' aligned to the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework. It is a detailed 48-week curriculum meant for learning in the age group of three to six-year-olds in Anganwadi Centres. An adaptation of it is being developed at the Maharashtra State Council of Educational Research and Training (MSCERT), Pune known as Maitrayee Bal Manashi, which translates to "befriending a child's heart." This is planned to be rolled out soon.

While the curriculum is aligned with the NEP and NCF, there is a lack of clarity in its implementation. This can lead to confusion and inconsistencies. It is essential to provide extensive handholding and support to the AWWs to ensure the effective delivery of the curriculum.

- **Daily Routine:** While 23 centres had a visible daily routine, 6 of these centres were not actively following it.
- 44 centres reported following some kind of routine, while 28 centres did not adhere to any routine, reflecting inconsistent implementation of structured activities.
- **Access to AAKAR Curriculum:** 48 centres were found to be following some of the AAKAR curriculum, while 26 centres were not implementing it. This split indicates that while the curriculum is in place in many centres, there remains a significant portion where it is either not accessible or not being used, potentially leading to a lack of uniformity in the educational experience.



Routine and Curriculum Implementation

What Can Be Done

Aadhaarshila or the Maitri Balmanashi, could be adopted uniformly across all the centres. Transitioning to the Aadhaarshila Curriculum needs to be done systematically. It has to be ensured that all centres across the state working independently or with the support of NGOs must follow one curriculum. Handholding, mentoring after an experiential training can help the state achieve its goal. This could offer Maharashtra an opportunity to better align its education system with the needs of its children, the expectations of national policies, and the state's unique cultural context.

Making AWCs More Inclusive

The National Education Policy (NEP) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) emphasize the importance of supporting children with special needs (CWSN) from early childhood. However, there is currently no standardized approach to address the needs of Divyang children in AWCs. To address this gap, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) introduced the Divyang Protocol in 2023, providing a structured framework for AWWs to screen, include, and refer children with disabilities.

Inclusion is a concept that has been interpreted and understood in numerous ways. The simplest meaning is that all people—regardless of their colour, race, religion, ability, or socio-economic status—should have the same opportunities as those who are considered "normal." Over the years, many efforts have been made to bring this philosophy into practice. With the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, some progress has been made for children aged 6-14, yet early childhood intervention remains a critical area requiring targeted support.

The NEP 2020 further underscores the importance of early education, recognizing the need for early identification and intervention for CWSN. This early support is essential to maximize the potential of these children and facilitate their integration into mainstream education and society.

To address this, the Divyang Protocol provides a comprehensive framework for Anganwadi workers, focusing on three key steps: identification, inclusion, and referral. By enabling AWWs to effectively screen and support children with disabilities, the protocol promotes a holistic approach to their development and well-being. The collaboration between Anganwadi centres and various stakeholders—including parents, educators, and service providers—ensures that children receive tailored interventions and necessary resources from an early stage.

Ultimately, the Divyang Protocol aims to create a more inclusive and accessible environment within Anganwadi

Centres, fostering the social, emotional, and cognitive development of CWSN. This approach aligns with the broader vision of equitable education and social integration for all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds.

In Navi Mumbai, UNICEF, in collaboration with its technical partner Vikramshila Education Resource Society (VERS), has been working to strengthen early childhood education across Palghar and Navi Mumbai. Recognizing the importance of early intervention, the VERS team identified 25 children showing developmental delays among 40 AWCs supported by them. However, due to socio-economic constraints, parents have faced difficulties accessing services at the District Early Intervention Centre (DEIC) in Thane.

To address this, UNICEF/VERS partnered with the HANS Foundation, which operates a free therapy bus based at NIEPID, Kharghar. The therapy bus provides both assessments and therapeutic interventions at various locations across Navi Mumbai. In collaboration with the HANS Foundation, a CWSN camp was organized at a designated Anganwadi in Ghansoli. This event brought professionals—including social workers, psychologists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, and special educators—who offered assessments and created individualized home plans for parents and children.

Additionally, during discussions with the CDPO Ms. Jyoti Patil, the ETC Centre at Vashi was identified as a valuable resource, providing integrated special education services under one roof. This centralized model ensures that parents and children receive comprehensive support without the burden of visiting multiple service providers.

What Can Be Done

DEIC services located in Thane maybe extended to Navi Mumbai through the NMMC. Additionally, the services available at the ETC (Education, Training and Service centre), Vashi, can be made available to the Anganwadi children.

Training sessions on the Divyang Protocol can be conducted for the AWWs, this will allow the AWWS to support the children with special needs in the Anganwadis, as well as at their homes and community.

Facilitate access to ETC through the bus service that is available at the ETC, ensuring consistent attendance for CWSN and their families. Moreover, ongoing guidance and support from ETC professionals to parents can be offered which can help them support their children at home.

AWWs and parents can be educated about government schemes and services available for children with disabilities and provided with support for availing these services.

CASE STORIES

Turbhe

Walking between two rows of houses, we navigated carefully, mindful of the open drains along the way. The narrow, labyrinthine pathway leading to Centre 160 was dimly lit and filled with the pungent stench of garbage. Overhead, only slivers of the sky were visible, framed by the edges of corrugated roofs jutting from the houses. "Just a little further," called the member of the Vikramshila Maharashtra team guiding us.

"Do children walk this entire path to reach the Anganwadi centre?" I asked.

"No," Karuna replied with a reassuring smile. "They live nearby."

"We're here," Karuna announced, but I couldn't spot the Anganwadi Centre. Instead, we had arrived at what seemed to be a shared courtyard, a communal space encircled by houses whose doors opened directly onto it. The area was dimly lit, with only a faint glow from the afternoon sun filtering through unseen gaps.

A large drying rack stood prominently, flanked by a pile of clothes and scattered utensils, cluttering the spot where the pathway dissolved into the shared space. The rest of the courtyard was dotted with pairs of shoes and doormats, adding to the sense of a lived-in, bustling corner of the neighbourhood.

While we were still taking in the surroundings, we heard the chorus of children from the Anganwadi Centre repeating a poem. The sound guided us to a small one-room flat. One side of the room, the wall next to the entrance, was covered by a sofa piled with several blankets, pillows and clothes. The next wall was partly covered by a large wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a door, which opened into the kitchen. The third wall was covered by another cupboard and a makeshift home temple lit in pink lights. The remaining space in the room was occupied by about 25 kids and a teacher who was holding up a book.

Karuna described, "The house is rented out to the Anganwadi Centre for a couple of hours every day. Meanwhile, the family members loiter around. Sometimes, if the need arises, they go back and forth while the children study. Moreover, if the AWW or AWH is on her period she is not allowed to enter the room.

The AWW, despite facing numerous challenges, stood out as a bright and positive influence in the centre. Her determination and commitment to her role were evident as she put in every effort to make the learning environment engaging for the children. Despite the limitations in resources and infrastructure, she creatively utilized the available materials to keep the children actively involved.

Nerul

We could hear the sing-song voices of children reciting their lessons even before Anganwadi Centre No. 198 came into view. When we arrived, we found it nestled in a common room surrounded by clusters of houses. The room itself was dimly lit, with sunlight streaming faintly through the open doorway, revealing a rather stark setting.

Over 20 children sat in a circle on a strip of rug on the floor, repeating after the Anganwadi worker, who had a blue plastic winnow. One by one, she called the children

to her, asking them to identify what it was and its colour in a monotonous exercise. The walls were plastered with the usual assortment of government posters promoting schemes, alongside alphabet charts and pictures of fruits and animals—familiar but uninspiring decor.

In one corner, a dusty pile of government-issued gifts for new mothers sat forgotten, while a shelf displayed a bust of Ambedkar. Opposite, another corner housed a bust of Chhatrapati Shivaji. The room felt more like a storage space for token gestures than a place where young minds could be sparked with imagination and curiosity. Mumbai Vikramshila Team member Karuna pointed out that classes usually get disrupted during festivals as the room is occupied during those occasions.

Centre 198, however, demonstrated a strong community interest in early childhood education. The loud noise emanating from the centre was a testament to the vibrant and active atmosphere inside, signalling to the community that classes were in session. This not only showcased the engagement of the children but also highlighted the awareness and support of the local community for the AWC. The large attendance of students further reflected the parents' willingness to send their children to the centre, indicating a high level of trust and investment in the early education process.

With this enthusiasm from the community and a solid foundation of engagement, the centre has the potential to evolve into a model AWC. A key area for improvement could be providing simple and effective guidance on teaching pedagogy. By introducing child-friendly teaching methods, the centre could create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Training the AWW and AWH on age-appropriate pedagogical strategies, such as play-based learning, interactive activities, and emotional nurturing, could enhance the quality of education delivered

Nerul

For the past nine years, Jyotika Gaikwad has been teaching at Anganwadi Centres, and now she oversees a lively group of over 25 children at Centre 199. Speaking above the din of excited voices and hurried footsteps, she explained that most of the children's parents worked as masons, cooks, housekeepers, or did other small-scale jobs. These parents left home early each day, with little time to care for or prepare their children.

The Anganwadi Centre, a small space tucked into the midst of a densely packed urban settlement, was a stark contrast to the cramped, often dimly lit homes these children came from. "This space is a novelty for them," Jyotika pointed out. "They have no room to play freely at home, and many lack any parental engagement."

The result was visible in the frenzied energy of the children, who were running and playing all over the room. The scene was chaotic. A window sill was cluttered with plastic bottles, while the walls carried the usual assortment of governmental promotional posters and alphabet and animal charts. A jumble of mismatched furniture sprawled across the limited space, leaving little room for structured activities. In one corner, a tiny side room was packed with government-issued gifts for new mothers, now gathering dust.

The chaos was further exacerbated by the absence of the Anganwadi Helper, who was away for capacity-building training. To manage the crowd, Jyotika had enlisted the help of a parent and her young daughter. Centre 199 highlighted the pressing need for better planning, imaginative use of space, and resources to engage children meaningfully.

Centre 199 has the potential to become an ideal AWC with a few targeted improvements. One key enhancement could be the provision of more TLMs. Increasing the variety and quantity of TLMs would help create a more engaging and interactive learning environment for the children. By offering more hands-on activities, children would be able to engage in experiential learning, and this can bring down the chaos in the classroom. In addition to more TLMs, better lighting would significantly improve the atmosphere of the centre.

Nerul

Centre 186 stood out as a bright spot amidst the Anganwadi Centres we visited. Housed in a one-room building rented by a housing society, it offered a space that was surprisingly well-suited for young learners. Unlike the cramped, dimly-lit rooms typical of many centres, this one was spacious, well-lit, and thoughtfully arranged, providing an inviting environment for the children.

What set Centre 186 apart was its versatility. While it doubled as a classroom for a skill development programme, with sewing machines neatly tucked away under makeshift covers, the room retained enough open space for free play. Outside, there was additional room for the children to run and play, along with the convenience of a toilet and a small storage room—luxuries often missing in similar setups.

Rajeswari Tukaram Desaore, the Anganwadi Worker (AWW), spoke with visible satisfaction about the centre. "I have no complaints here," she shared. "In my previous posting at Nerul Gao Sector 20, I taught in a garage. It was a constant struggle to keep the children's attention with cars and people coming and going all the time."

Though the room occasionally had to serve other purposes during festivals, Centre 186 remained an example of how thoughtful infrastructure and design could transform the learning experience for young children.

Ghansoli Gao

Centre 97 at Ghansoli Gao functioned out of a garage. Vikramshila Team member Karuna pointed out that before we arrived for the visit the bigger cars had gone out for the day. It was unlike any Anganwadi we had seen. Centre 97 operated out of a space so limited in size that it couldn't even be called cramped—it simply had no room for much of anything. Located in the front area of a gatekeeper or caretaker's quarters, it was surrounded by parked bikes and cars, with vehicles constantly coming and going. This created a chaotic, noisy, and unsafe environment for children.

The bare walls were devoid of any charts or learning materials—not because they weren't available, but because the apartment owners didn't allow anything to be stuck on them. There was no designated play area, no storage room for teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and not even a toilet for the children or staff. Every day, the AWW has to bring all the TLMs from home and pack them up again at the end of the day, adding to her workload.

To make matters worse, food delivered by the Self-Help Group (SHG) further disrupted the centre's operations. With no space to store or serve meals, the arrival of food turned an already chaotic setup into a logistical nightmare.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recommendations to enhance the quality, safety, and inclusivity of AWCs while ensuring meaningful and efficient use of resources.

   Effective Resource Allocation and Intervention in AWCs

   - Prioritization of High-Risk AWCs - Create a prioritized list of AWCs based on risk factors like unsafe locations (e.g., near busy roads, industrial zones, or flood-prone areas), inadequate space for play, poor sanitation, or insufficient teaching and learning materials (TLMs).
   - Focus efforts on these identified centres to ensure resources reach the most vulnerable AWCs.
   - Strategic Use of CSR Contributions
   - Encourage CSR partners to fund targeted improvements such as boundary walls, age-appropriate play equipment, sanitation upgrades, or teaching aids in disadvantaged AWCs.
   - Avoid duplication of resources in centres that already have adequate facilities.
   - Collaboration with Urban Planners
   - Leverage urban planning expertise for spatial analysis and community design to:
   - Identify optimal locations for new AWCs
   - Suggest improvements to existing centres, ensuring accessibility, safety, and integration into community hubs like parks or schools
   - Regular Safety Audits
   - Implement routine safety audits to maintain AWCs as secure spaces.
   - Involve local stakeholders, including parents and community members, to ensure transparency and shared responsibility.

2. Recommendations to Enhance Learning and Resource Utilization in AWCs

   Enhanced Provision of TLMs

   - Double TLM supplies if attendance exceeds 25% of class capacity to ensure adequate resources and minimize overcrowding-related issues.
   - Accessible Guidelines for Effective Resource Use
   - Share step-by-step "how-to" guidelines via WhatsApp (text or video) with workers whenever new TLM or resources are provided, ensuring effective utilization and minimizing waste.
   - Training for Low-Cost Resource Creation
   - Train AWWs and AWHs to make low-cost or no-cost toys using recycled or natural materials (e.g., puppets, sensory bottles, building blocks) to supplement existing TLM.
   - Parent Involvement in Toy Development
   - Organize interactive parent-child activity days for creating educational materials. Engage skilled parents in crafting toys or tools, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and enhancing parental understanding of play in early childhood development.
   - Provide Early Stimulation Toys for under 3 children
   - Age appropriate early stimulation toys to be prepared using low cost materials in collaboration with parents and community

   By implementing these strategies, AWCs can optimize resources, improve learning environments, and build stronger community connections.

3. Recommendations for Inclusion in Early Childhood Education

   Training on the Divyang Protocol

   - Conduct training sessions for AWWs on the Divyang Protocol and services offered at ETC centres to foster inclusivity.
   - Provide regular therapeutic sessions at ETC centres for CWSN, focusing on assessments and tailored interventions
   - Make more hospitals accessible for therapeutic interventions. It will encourage parents to utilise the services easily.
   - Use existing resources e.g. therapy bus service to facilitate consistent attendance at ETC for CWSN and their families.
   - Parental Guidance and Support
   - Offer ongoing guidance from ETC professionals to parents, empowering them to support their children's development at home.
   - Awareness of Government Schemes
   - Educate AWWs and parents about government schemes and services for children with disabilities and assist them in accessing these resources.

   These measures can help build a more inclusive early childhood education system that supports the needs of all children.