

ARTHASHASTRA

By Amit Kapoor

IN ANY SOCIETY, children of the day shape the future of the morrow. Development prospects of economies are dependent on the opportunities they provide their children to grow and learn and protect their rights, along with a healthy living environment. Besides being a moral imperative, it is therefore, essential for countries to invest in the future of their children.

On this front, India has a particularly high demographic advantage over other economies, with over 40 per cent of its population below 18 years of age as per the 2011 Census. This trend, though, will now change, the fertility rate in India being 2.3. In comparison, the fertility rate

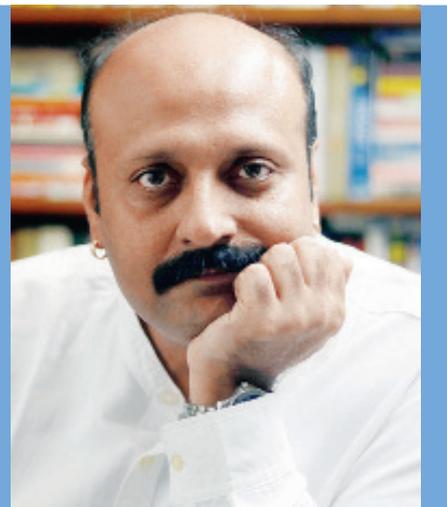
Considerable progress has been made in the education sector by universalising primary education, improving completion rates and addressing gender disparity. Another important aspect of child development is freedom of personal choice. Fulfilment of these rights, however, get compromised in early marriages and child labour, among other things. India has been successful in significantly reducing early marriages, resulting in a global drop in the number of child brides. These improvements have been possible through child-centric policies and initiatives of the Indian government.

However, comparative statistics reveal that significant deficits in child development still remain. India still bears 23.8

employment also results in reduction in crime, which is not only a societal benefit but also saves crucial state resources that would have otherwise been spent in crime prevention. Finally, with more people entering the workforce and paying taxes, a rise in government revenue will be a future dividend for resources invested in child progress today. Thus, it makes immense economic sense for a nation to invest in its children and orient its policies towards their development.

It is also essential to make early interventions as the provision of healthcare and educational facilities during the initial years significantly impact cognitive abilities of children, thus, determining their future productivity. Apart from

Economics of Child Progress



in China is 1.63. Thus, the population of children in India will remain significantly high for some time providing India an opportunity to ensure better child progress to reap future demographic dividends.

India has undoubtedly made significant progress in ensuring development of the child of late. Being among the fastest-growing economies in the world has enabled the country to make significant progress in different facets of development of the child. For instance, in basic nutrition, child stunting declined from 48 per cent in 2006 to 38 per cent in 2016, and anaemic children declined by 11 percentage points during the same period. The under-five deaths also fell below one million for the first time ever.

per cent of the global burden of malnourishment, for instance. India's spending on healthcare is fairly low at around 3.35 per cent of the GDP compared to the world average of 10.02 per cent.

There is an urgent need for India to act on these issues as the extent of gains to the country will be significantly far-reaching. Improvement in health relates positively to the GDP, since a healthy workforce enhances productivity. There are other indirect benefits of child progress. First, when children get adequate nourishment and proper education, they are less likely to depend on public welfare later in life.

Secondly, higher employability and

affecting their lifetime opportunities through learning capabilities, it will also have a profound impact on creating the human capital that the country needs to boost development in coming decades.

A regional level analysis of child progress to envelop spatial differences across regions is a prerequisite for such interventions, however. Across the vast expanse of the nation, it is not surprising to find inter and intra-state variations in economic and social conditions. A local policy that is customised, based on regional strengths and weaknesses, would prove to be more effective than a common one-size-fits-all approach by the central authorities. **BW**

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