

Investing in our children

Children under six years of age make up nearly 20 per cent of India's population. Were their welfare high on the country's agenda, it is hard to imagine that so many would continue to remain undernourished, stunted, and wasted in an era of buoyant economic growth. Data from the third National Family Health Survey conducted in 2005-06 tell us that as many as 42.4 per cent of all children under six are undernourished — that is, they weigh less than what they should for their age — down only 2.1 percentage points from the figure of 1998-99. The percentage of stunted children has fallen from 44 to 37 but at the current rate of decline, it will take more than two decades for Indian children to achieve a normal height-for-age distribution. More than half the children under six are not fully immunised and 77 per cent are anaemic. Three decades after it was launched, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme remains the primary vehicle of government intervention. However, as the recently released FOCUS survey on the status of children under six and the performance of anganwadi centres (AWCs) shows, the ICDS is simply not providing care of a quality and quantity India so desperately needs. With no 'trickle down' and no effective government intervention, India's children continue to languish.

Against this grim background, the December 13, 2006 judgment of the Supreme Court (PUCL v Union of India & Others, Judgment by Pasayat and Kapadia JJ, the text of which is available at www.thehindu.com) on the universalisation of the ICDS assumes great significance. The apex court has directed the Central Government to "sanction and operationalise" a minimum of 1.4 million AWCs by 2008. The bench also ruled that rural communities and slum dwellers are "entitled to an 'Anganwadi on demand' (not later than three months from the date of demand) in cases where a settlement has at least 40 children under six but no AWC." This judgment, like earlier ones on the universalisation of school meals, has the potential to transform the childhood of India's most underprivileged young citizens. The AWC was conceived as a space where children regardless of parental income or place of residence could receive nutritional support, immunisations, and early childhood education. Their mothers, too, are entitled to antenatal care. For the promise to be fulfilled, three things must happen. First, attention needs to be paid to ICDS design. For a start, AWCs must have proper premises and provide cooked nutritious food rather than ready-to-eat items. Secondly, budgetary allocations at the Central and State levels need to be increased substantially. Thirdly, the Supreme Court must monitor the implementation of its order with the same sense of urgency as it has all its rulings on unauthorised urban construction. India has an appalling record of neglecting the welfare of its children. It is time they were made the country's number one priority.