1.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

India has a wealth of traditional practices in early childhood care and education that date back almost 5000 years. It was the changing social context, over the years which laid the seeds for the introduction of the concept of early childhood education or preschool education in the country. Till India became independent of the British rule in 1947, the need for early childhood education particularly in the form of preschool education was primarily fulfilled by voluntary agencies and private institutions. This initiative in India has been documented formally in the later half of the nineteenth century. The value of this education lies in the recognition and acceptance of it as vital for the developmental need of all children, and that every child has a right to preschool education of equitable quality. The National Policy of Education (1986) has given a great deal of importance to this aspect and views it as a crucial input in the strategy of human resource development as a feeder and support programme for primary education (EFA Report, 2007). The field of early education has considerably expanded over last two decades as reflected in shifting usage of the term from Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Development (ECD) to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It refers not only to what is happening within the child but also to the care that child requires in order to thrive (Shabnam, 2003).

Researches have shown that the most crucial years for learning are the preschool years when the child’s brain is growing and developing. These are the years when nurturing and appropriate stimulation will reap lifelong benefits as children develop self-worth and a host of new skills that will serve them for a lifetime (www.aea.aide-et-action.org.com). Children enter into preschool life with a significant background of learning experience within their family and outside home. Preschool children come to the early setting as active, experienced learner with a natural curiosity. These children are unique and eager to make
sense of their world, to develop relationship and to extend their skills (Sood, 1995). Children at ECCE tend to learn more rapidly due to interaction with other children and also come across several learning and play activities. They develop self help qualities and become more independent and confident (www.preschools.indiaedu.com). Early childhood care and education is all that the name implies and more. It comprises all the essential support a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the support a family and community needs to promote the child’s healthy development (www.aea.aide-et-action.org.com). Preschool education is the provision of education for children before the commencement of statutory education between the ages of three to six years (Wikipedia, 2008). It is designed to stimulate and support the child’s motor, cognitive, language, social and emotional development. Preschool education centers in India are known by different names such as nursery school, shishu vihar, shishu vatikas, anganwadis, balwadis and montessori schools. All these serve children before entry into primary schools (Shabnam, 2003).

![Diagram of Objectives of Preschool Education](source: NCERT Report, 1987)

**OBJECTIVES OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

*Source: NCERT Report, 1987 Figure no.1*

Preschool education in its wider sense implies not only acquisition of knowledge but also the development of abilities, skills and qualities of character. There has been a
worldwide consensus among psychologists, that preschool age is the critical period in the life span of the child. It is during this period that foundation for all later development is laid. The importance of early years of life in the personality development has been emphasized by Freud as according to him “child is the father of man”. The bare structure of personality is formed by the age of five years. Rousseau (1972) in his book “Emile” is credited with identifying the period of childhood as important. He described that a child is just not a small or young adult, but in fact going through a unique period in his life. Childhood -a time when, like a flower the child is “unfolding and growing”. Bloom (1964) in his book “Stability and Change in Human Characteristic” has argued that major changes in the personality characteristic are not possible after the child has reached high level of stability (Shabnam, 2003). Thus, the major objective in the early childhood stage should be therefore to help children in developing basic concepts which would lead them towards logical reasoning (Lin, 2002).

1.2. PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SERVICES IN INDIA

It is now globally acknowledged that the first six years are the most crucial in human development. There is no other time in human life when so much is learned in such a brief period. In India this awareness is reflected by large number of preschool services run by government and private efforts (Kaul, 2009). The Government of India has identified eight flagship programmes of which ICDS is one (MWCD Report, 2007). The scheme of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was evolved to make a coordinated effort for an integrated programme to deliver a package of services and was formally launched on October 2, 1975 with only 33 projects. Out of these 33 projects, 19 were rural, 10 were tribal,
and 4 were urban, spread over in all the states and Union Territory of Delhi (PRC Report, 2009).

Integrated Child Development Services Programme continues to be world’s most unique early childhood development programme which is being satisfactorily operated for more than three decades of its existence. The uniqueness of this programme lies in the fact that it has introduced and includes preschool education component for the children whereas other components have existed earlier in various national programmes and have been routed through ICDS to reach the larger population (Sachar et al, 1996). ICDS is now operating 6,719 projects in the country, with 1,241,749 operational anganwadi centers (Katoch, 2011). Out of the 14 lac habitations in India with living population, anganwadi centers are already available in 12 lac habitations.

For the Eleventh Five Year Plan, Government of India appointed a committee to work on ICDS and preschool education. This report found that on an average, 37% children were registered for preschool education activities in anganwadi centres. The study also found that the gap has reduced between the children registered for preschool education and those actually attending the centers. Children attending preschool education activities under ICDS have continuously increased from about 17 million in March 2002 to nearly 19 million in 2003, 20 million in 2004 and 23 million in 2005. The working group calculated that preschool education will have to be provided for 70 million children by the end of 2011 and 73 million by 2016 (Gopal, 2006).

The universalization of ICDS is an opportunity for meeting the growing need of early childhood education in the country. The nodal agency for coordination and monitoring of the scheme at the central level is the Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development and its counterpart departments at the state level, the scheme
is centrally funded (www.education.nic.com). ICDS conceptually embodies a unique integrated, cost effective approach for holistic development and provides a package of services to children, expectant and nursing mothers and lately introduced services for adolescent girls. The package includes (I) Supplementary nutrition and therapeutic nutrition, (II) Non-formal preschool education, (III) Immunization, (IV) Health checkups, (V) Referral services and Nutrition and Health education (NIPCCD, 2006).

ICDS services are provided through a vast network of ICDS centers which are better known as “anganwadi.” The term anganwadi developed from the idea that a good early childhood care and development centre could be run with low cost material even when located in an “angan” or “courtyard” (Gunasekran, 2009).

**SOME GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WHICH SUPPORT PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA**

*Source: NCERT Report, 1987*
1.3. PRESCHOOL EDUCATION COMPONENT UNDER ICDS SCHEME

Preschool education is a very crucial component of the package of services envisaged under ICDS as it seeks to lay the foundation of physical, psychological, cognitive and social development of children. Its programme for children in the anganwadi centers are directed towards providing and ensuring a natural, joyful and stimulating environment, with emphasis on necessary inputs for optimal growth and development. The main objective of preschool education component is to stimulate and satisfy the curiosity of child, rather follow any rigid learning curriculum. Preschool education in a non-formal setting forms the backbone of ICDS programme as its all services converge at the anganwadi (Shabnam, 2003).

Non-formal education is to be imparted to children in the age group of 3-6 years at anganwadi center especially to children from socio-economically deprived sections of the society. The early learning component of ICDS should involve significant inputs for providing a sound foundation for lifelong learning and development. The Government of Gujarat has setup up a Toy Bank to provide deprived children the opportunity to play with toys and experience play-based learning. There are about 17 lakh children covered by around 25,000 AWCs in Gujarat who are catered to by the Toy-Bank initiative (MHRD, 2002). ICDS provides increased opportunities for promoting early development, associated with improved enrolment and retention in the early primary years (www.books.google.com). Early childhood education envisaged in ICDS programme is an essential component for children who are at the verge of going into formal education system (NIPCCD, 2006).

The ICDS programme in its more than three decades of existence has reflected both strengths and weaknesses regarding the preschool education. Some of the strengths of the scheme have highlighted its significant impact to enhance the overall development of children. The National Evaluation Report on ICDS indicated that it played positive role in
promoting enrolment in elementary preschools. However, the report also stated that there was tremendous scope for improving the implementation of the preschool education component (PSE) of the ICDS Scheme (Sharma, 1992). PSE imparted through anganwadi under the ICDS scheme emerged as a single most important factor in the better performance of attenders, even many years after having attended anganwadi’s, thus indicating its sustainability. ICDS is an effective medium to enhance early learning among children in the long run by way of non-formal education (Sachar et al, 1996). It was observed in a study that academic performance of children who received preschool education under ICDS Scheme was better than those children who do not attended anganwadi. The behavior pattern of children with respect to obedience, behavior with peers, elders and teachers indicated long term positive effects of ICDS services (Gyanendra, 1997). The children exposed to education through ICDS in younger years had better mental status than those who did not receive such stimulation (Sachar et al, 1996).

However, some weaknesses of PSE are evident from the various researches and reports conducted which reveal that children in the National study did not perform well on identification of colours and other cognitive tasks, emphasizing the need for conducting creative and cognitive activities as an integral part of the preschool education (Sharma, 1992). Similar observations were made by Arora et al, 2006 that preschool education is one of the major component of ICDS but this remains one of the weakest component as the worker possess limited skills to conduct preschool education in a holistic manner and are less favorably inclined towards children.

Study sponsored by NIPCCD (1992) reported that the AWW’s focused on formal method of learning, majority of children could count up five objects but the cognitive and manipulation competencies were found to be weak. The time spent on non-formal preschool
education was very low and participation of children was not punctual and regular. Observations at AWCs indicated that the physical activities were not popular and very few AWCs conducted activities for the development of finer-muscle coordination with low participation. Learning through outdoor examples and interaction with the environment are noticed only in very few AWCs; play and outdoor activities were not found to be stimulating (Mathew, 1994).

Physical environment of anganwadi centers is not very conducive to conduct preschool education activities and accommodation continues to be a major problem. Preschool education activities which would cater to the holistic development of children is found to be lacking at AWCs. Low priority is given to activities which can promote physical, motor, aesthetic and social skills among children in preschool years (Das, 1999). Preschool education at ICDS centers must be organized in a play way form so that the children attending these centers develop desirable attitude by way of providing intellectual simulation through non-formal play way activities (NIPCCD, 2006). Several commissioned studies like of NIPCCD (1992, 2006) NCERT (1998), NCAER (2003) and other micro level studies conducted by various institutions of higher learning and national technical and academic bodies have suggested that though AWWs are making efforts for bringing children to utilize preschool education activities, however, due to absence of systematic curriculum and infrastructure and lack of skill based training to workers it becomes difficult to deliver the required results (MWCD, 2007). It is found that AWWs received training in absence of quality supervision/feed back and lack of community involvement in ICDS. Due to such reasons the workers do not put to use that is learned and the children have to make do with a very limited range of activities, this negatively affects not only their ability to undertake all tasks required but also impacts the community perception towards anganwadi centers. Non-
availability of teaching aids or funds to purchase teaching-learning material is a serious constraint and consequently the communities largely perceive the anganwadi as food distribution centre which has an affect on attendance and conduct of effective preschool education (www.zunia.org.com).

The **Mid Term Evaluation of Tenth Five Year Plan** has pointed out that the preschool education component of the ICDS scheme continues to remain one of the weakest area in view of focusing on the health and nutritional aspect. Thus over the time, there has been a continuous concern relating to quality of preschool education services, which has a strong ground to recommend a comprehensive review of the existing arrangements from holistic perspective to ensure quality early childhood education for all children (Evaluation Report, 2007). A number of initiatives have been taken by the National and State Government to strengthen the preschool education component of ICDS. These initiatives include distribution of preschool education kits to anganwadi centers located in all 35 States. Under 11th Five Year plan, a well designed and well thought institutional monitoring system concerning early childhood education for all sectors public, private, NGOs has to be established in every state/UT administration at the sub national system level and at the national level. This will not only facilitate the convergence mechanism across various players of ECCE but would also ensure the flow of data base information right from grass root to Government of India (GOI) level (MWCD, 2007).

1.4. **IMPLICATION OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN**

A body of research reveals that there is a strong link between preschool attendance and children’s development. The children with preschool education exposure have increased
cognitive abilities, focused attention and attain early literacy concepts (Ackerman and Barnett, 2006).

The preschool education component of early childhood care and education has demonstrated a positive impact on retention rates, language abilities and achievement level in primary grades. It provides stimulating experience to children and facilitates optimal cognitive development and quality aspects such as healthy environment, stimulating activities, encouraging care-giving teachers are imperative to ensure all round development of children. It is now undisputedly acknowledged that systematic provision of early childhood education provides sound foundation for later development. Recent meta-analysis found that preschool education has significant and lasting effects on children’s cognitive and language abilities and school progress. Participation of children in various learning based activities helps them to develop advance skills in areas such as following direction, problem solving and attainment in early learning (Barnett, 2008). A number of researchers have investigated the impact of early childhood programme on cognitive and language development in preschool years. On perusal of their results it is evident that the cognitive abilities increase with the age of children and are enriched by preschool experience.

It is believed that non-formal preschool education component of ICDS plays a vital role in enhancing cognitive abilities among children. Similar findings have been reported by researchers that children who attended anganwadi centre in early childhood years had significantly better mental status than those who did not attend or receive any form of preschool education. This improved mental status of the ICDS beneficiaries was attributed to the non-formal preschool education provided through ICDS scheme (Sachar et al, 1996). In another study conducted in Kerala, India on two groups of children, one group who were attending private nursery school and another who are receiving education through ICDS
centre, it was reported that nursery going children and anganwadi children are more or less on the same developmental level, however on fine-motor, cognitive and personal social development, nursery school children were found to be better (NIPCCD, 1995). Decades of research have shown that quality preschool programme helps to enhance cognitive, literacy and social skills which are necessary for school success as well as promoting school achievement in the elementary grades and increasing level of educational attainment. It has positive effects and facilitates improved developmental outcomes in children. It nurtures the various abilities such as language, literacy skills, knowledge of various concepts, oral communication, school readiness and general cognitive skills that contribute to better scholastic development (Arthur and Reynold, 2004). Mishra (1993) assessed the effect of quality preschooling on the perceptual abilities among nursery going children in comparison of anganwadi group. Nursery school children were found to be more skillful than anganwadi children, not only in terms of arranging pictures in their logical sequence but also in terms of coherence and organized description of events in pictures. All the cognitive and language based tasks were significantly fostered by quality school attendance. Similar observation were also found by Yadav et al (2010) that nursery school children performed better on all parameters of cognitive and language development than anganwadi children. The preceding studies bring out the fact that preschool education proves a better start to formal education. Children show attainment in pre-reading, early number, language, non-verbal reasoning and spatial awareness at formative stage (Sammon et al, 2004).

1.5. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

There is no denying that parents are crucial to a child’s basic care and well-being, but parents are also essential for early childhood education. The kindergarten years are integral to
the success of early childhood education. This is the time when children’s brain is developing at a rapid rate and they learn language skills and patterns that will stay with them throughout their lives. Both mother and father should be centre stage in their child’s learning as evidence underlines that this is vital to educational success (Kimberly, 2009). Therefore, parent’s involvement plays a vital role to enhance literacy skills and development of children even more so when their involvement begins in the cradle and extends to the early childhood education centre (Desimone, 1999).

Parents are the prime educators until the child attends nursery or start school and remain a major influence on their children’s learning through preschool period. Early reading experience with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction, indeed parental involvement in their child’s reading has been found to be the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Pellergini, 1995). When parents get involved, children schooling is affected through their acquisition of knowledge, skills and an increased sense of confidence that they can succeed in school (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). Parental involvement in a child’s schooling is a more powerful force than other family background indicator (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004). Involvement in early years have been found to equate with better outcomes for the child and have significant impact on children’s cognitive development both at the age 3 years and when they enter into formal education (Williams et al, 2002). Parental involvement in the children’s learning positively affects the child’s academic performance, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioral problems (Fan and Chen, 2001). Parent child relationship are improved when parents frequently participate in children’s activities and have awareness about importance of preschool education and its vital
role in children lives (Hohmann, 1995). Infact, benefits of parental involvement extend beyond the realm of literacy and educational achievement (Patricia, 2009).

Studies show that children whose parents are involved show greater social and emotional development, including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, are more self directed and have better social adjustment and mental health (Allen and Dally, 2002). The importance of parental involvement as an accelerating and motivating factor in their children’s education is a worldwide accepted fact. Actively participating parents help their children in their academic development by going to school and participating in open houses (Martin, 2008). There is a need to educate parents towards preschool education as they do not have clear idea regarding the purpose of early childhood education and its vial role in preschool years (Yashodhra, 1991).

Preschool education under ICDS programme has been quite disappointing and devoid of the real emphasis on child centered activities, which nurture the joy and develop creativity among children as stress is laid on formal learning process. ICDS functionaries reported that parents lay stress on formal learning process for their children as they did not have correct perception towards preschool education activities (Mathew, 1994). Parents must know the significance of early childhood education and also be made aware of supportive services such as ICDS. Such awareness may help parents to send their children to anganwadi centers and provide favorable environment for the child’s development with respect to health and hygiene and also encourage their learning and curiosity. They can also be made aware about the importance of play way method of learning at the preschool stage to bring about necessary school readiness as an initial step to further schooling (Nair, 1997). Both the parents and teachers need to provide opportunities for children to learn and create teaching situation where children can develop an understanding of the world around them and develop thinking.
skills. Since ICDS has been envisaged and conceptualized as a community based programme so the participation of community is an essential condition for successful implementation of preschool education. Various research reports document that the community carried a positive attitude towards anganwadi centers and consider it as a good place where children can learn, read and write in play way manner. Community extended their contribution towards preschool education in the form of supervision of activities and solving problems of workers to arrange a locally available education material for them. They also motivate the community people to send their children to ICDS centers for non-formal education (NIPCCD, 2006). Such awareness creation would go a long way in bringing about quantitative and qualitative improvement in preschool education (Nair, 1997). The world of preschool education is changing for good but still it’s waiting to become the best (EFA Report, 2007).

1.6. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

The Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) is one of the most successful program in India with special reference to children and women. Preschool education is an important and crucial component of the scheme including children in the age group of 0-6 years under its ambit. Yet little research was focused so far on this component of the scheme especially in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Little empirical data is available on the nature and content of preschool education provided to children at various anganwadi centers of the state especially in Kashmir division. The present study had been designed to fill the lacunae by collecting in-depth and holistic data on preschool education imparted as part of the ICDS Scheme. The main dimensions of preschool education covered through the self-devised tools include physical setup of centre, developmental activities, teaching
methodology, preschool teacher related aspects, syllabus and program plan and parental interaction. For a more comprehensive view, comparative data regarding preschool education was gathered from Non-ICDS centers. Results of the study will be useful to improve the quality of preschool education imparted at anganwadi centers so that the developmental outcome of ICDS children are at par with other nursery school children. Further the results will have wide range of implication for educators, academicians, policy planners and more importantly parents to have holistic view on the overall functioning of ICDS and Non-ICDS centers.

Apart from studying the preschool education component, the present research moved one step ahead by correlating the cognitive and language development of children with the preschool education received by them at different centers respectively. Studies of such nature though have been conducted elsewhere are however, rare in Kashmir division. So, it will be interesting to assess whether preschool education received by young children has any implication for their cognitive and language development.

Another relevance behind conducting the study is to assess the perception of parents towards significance of preschool education and make them aware about their own contribution to the development of their children in early years of life and also evaluate their awareness about ICDS and its role in preschool education. Community perception is an integral requirement of ICDS; therefore parental awareness and perception towards the scheme needs to be assessed and on the basis of this suggestion if required, can be forwarded to strengthen the parental participation component of the scheme.
1.7 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has been designed with the following objectives

- To study the nature of preschool education imparted at ICDS centers.
- To compare the nature of preschool education imparted at ICDS centers with Non-ICDS centers.
- To find the differences in cognitive abilities and language development of children exposed to preschool experience from ICDS and Non–ICDS centers.
- To assess the relation between preschool education, cognitive and language development of the sample children.
- To study the perception of parents about the importance of preschool education and role of ICDS in preschool education.

1.8 HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

On the basis of previous researches it is expected that

- The quality of preschool education is better at Non-ICDS centers than ICDS centers.
- The language development is better among children attending Non-ICDS centers than ICDS centers.
- The cognitive abilities of ICDS children is higher than Non-ICDS children.
- Parents have a more positive attitude towards Non-ICDS centers than ICDS centers.