

This is ASER

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Sitting in the courtyard of her house in a village in Uttar Pradesh, Sangeeta was concentrating. First she listened to the problem "Suppose your mother gave you fifty rupees and asked you to buy something from the market for fifteen rupees. How much money would you have left? . Sangeeta thought for a while. After a few minutes, very shyly she asked. "Can I make lines?" We gave her paper and pencil. Painstakingly, she began to make marks on the paper. We could hear her counting softly to herself as she drew the lines ".....12, 13, 14, 15, 16,....."

Meanwhile, the day carried on around us. Sangeeta's mother was busy feeding the buffaloes that were tied to a post in the courtyard. She talked to us about her children and their school, as she went about her work. Sangeeta's grandfather was getting impatient. He wanted the child to hurry up. Neighbours were curious so they came to chat as well. Soon they brought their children and wanted us to see if their children could read and do arithmetic. Other children who had been playing with an old tyre under a big tree came running to see what was going on.

This is a common scene during ASER. The very act of asking children to read or to do arithmetic generates a lot of interest. People are inquisitive and intrigued by what is going on. Some people take the reading tools, try to read it themselves and get their children to read. Discussions and debates begin in courtyards and lanes and even in the middle of fields - discussions about children's ability to read, their learning levels, about their teachers and about schooling and learning. The data from each village is aggregated at the district, the data is entered at the state level and the report is published first at the national level. However, immediately, on the day that ASER is done in a village there is an impact. Whether the adults are literate or not, the assessment activity itself leads to curiosity and questions. Often parents do not know what their children can or cannot do. Sometimes children surprise themselves as well. Something new is added right then and there. And strategies and solutions begin to emerge. This is ASER¹.

Sangeeta has finished drawing 50 lines. The short vertical lines snake across the breadth of the page like a broad ribbon. She is now counting the lines. Patiently, she crosses off 15 lines and starts counting the remainder. Sangeeta's grandfather has wandered off.. Her mother has finished feeding the buffaloes and has started sweeping the courtyard. Many of the neighbours children have tried to read the simple paragraphs. But Sangeeta does not give up. She has finally finished counting. Now she looks up, still shy and says "35".

We see this over and over again, child after child, in village after village. When children are given a task, they do it very intently, with full attention. Whether a child can read or not, whether she or he can do subtraction problems or not, I never cease to being impressed by children. One on one, children carefully listen to what is expected of them and then do their best to meet these expectations. It is hard to remain unmoved by the intensity of children's desire to do well and by the seriousness of their effort. For me, this remains the enduring memory of ASER.

It is getting late. The ASER instructions say that the team has to visit 20 randomly picked households in the village. We have completed 18, another two to go. The young people who are with me are very diligent. Moving according to instructions, they pick the fifth house and start the process of talking to parents and children. Until the job is completely done, they will not leave the village.

When we started in 2005, there were many questions. How could all districts in the country be reached? How would local groups be found; groups that were interested first in understanding and then strengthening elementary education in their villages? Could people be trusted to do a reliable job? How to convince people that as citizens we need to engage, to participate and to work together if we want change?

¹ The word "ASER" in Hindi means impact.

Since the early days of ASER, we have learned many things. We have learned that there are people all over the country who come forward to take up new challenges. By and large, people can be trusted. Overwhelmingly, like the children in ASER, the adults too do a serious and diligent job. Much of the energy that fuels ASER comes from the young people of India. High school students in the densely forested mountains of Arunachal or teacher trainees in coastal Andhra, staff of the animal husbandry department in Ladakh, milk cooperatives in Gujarat, self help groups in Karnataka, rural women's BPOs in Rajasthan people coming together, to explore and understand, to learn and to help in creating better opportunities for children.

The ASER report is published once a year. Discussions about the findings continue for months. Debates over data lead to more deliberations. Some of this thinking and talking leads to changes in plans, provisions, policies and practice from Delhi to Sangeeta's village in UP. But at its very core, the spirit of ASER revolves around individuals who come together once a year to make the map of India come alive with tremendous energy and immense possibility. This is ASER.

