

What ASER Surveys have meant

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I have been studying ASER survey methodology and results since its inception in 2005. In the early years, I was also an enthusiastic participant in the final week before the results were released – carried away by the energy and the excitement of the process. For me, this has been an enriching personal and professional engagement – a survey that taught me so much about the audacity and the courage to cover almost all the states of India within a tight time-frame. It taught me a lot about what it takes to dream big and carry so many young and not-so-young people along for almost 17 years. I have met (courtesy Pratham and ASER) people who have not only remained valuable volunteers, but learnt so much from the process that it altered their perception of what citizens could do and perhaps should do to make a difference in the lives of children in school. Yes, ASER has had more than its share of critics who are uncomfortable with the methodology, the testing process and also the way the data is compiled, analysed and presented. While many of them admit that ASER surveys have turned the spotlight on what and how much are our children learning, they still retain their distance. Notwithstanding the mixed response ASER has received over the last 16-17 years, it is clear that when its survey results are released, people stop to take note, governments (central and state) feel compelled to respond, the media gives it sufficient coverage and there is a lot of debate and discussion among the educational research community.

This short piece is not about the data but about the ASER process that started in India and then was adopted in so many different countries – creating a network of people across the world.

Why is ASER so special?

First and foremost the process brought together hard core 'education-wallahs', NGOs, young volunteers of all ages and families of children who were part of the sample. As it has always been a community-based survey – the entire process of engaging with families and children in an informal manner got many of them thinking about what their children learn or do not learn in school.

Second, while India has many data sources that inform us about the state of schools, enrollment ratios of all kinds, assessment surveys and such like, the ASER surveys added another important dimension by documenting the state of our schools (government and private), the shadow education system – i.e., tuition centres and the proportion of respondents who attend them, the prevalence of private and government schools in rural India, how school-based committees have used the funds allocated, and most importantly generating a debate on education and schools in rural India. These are no small achievements as they have enriched our understanding of the education landscape in rural India.

Third, the young people who worked with ASER conducting the surveys felt more engaged and invested in education and the importance of learning. As a result they have become more aware of the cumulative burden of non-learning as one of the key factors that influence dropout rates at higher levels (among other factors that surveys like NSSO and NFHS have documented). NGOs associated with ASER or those who have been observing it from the side-lines have gained a lot more understanding of the importance of foundational learning and its critical importance in the learning trajectory.

Since 2005, the survey has mostly focused on three dimensions – household level interviews, testing of children (using tests to assess ability to read and to do simple arithmetic at the Std II level), and status of government schools. This may seem very simplistic to many people in the academia. But the very fact that a group of volunteers initiated such a large-scale community-based survey challenged many of us doing educational research. It demonstrated the importance of scale in surveys. As a person who has been engaged in small-scale qualitative research, the ASER process challenged many of my own assumptions about educational research – as a result, our group ERU Consultants felt empowered to take on multi-state studies and work with young people who were trained to do the field work. For me, as an educationist, the single most important contribution of ASER is that an independent group got together an interesting range of individuals and organisations to find out what is really happening on the ground within our schools and to our children. Creating a space for independent (neither government sponsored nor donor driven) assessment of India's progress towards universal elementary education has remained invaluable.

Quick surveys are invariably frowned upon by the academia. In particular educationists who are used to debating the finer points of learning and testing may express their outrage at such an endeavour. It may be worthwhile to reflect whether simple testing methods could actually empower families and civil society organisations to start a dialogue with teachers on what and how much our children are learning. ASER has been open about its sampling frame, the testing tools and the survey process. Equally, the data is publicly available and the tools are accessible to all. Such openness is rare in academic circles.

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It is important to mention that in addition to the “learning surveys”, ASER has done valuable in-depth studies. In 2009, ASER mounted a fascinating in-depth study (Inside Primary Schools 2011) that was done in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan that tracked children over 15 months (2009-10) to understand the factors that influence learning outcomes. In 2017 (ASER Beyond Basics) the focus was on young people in the 14 to 18 age group; in 2019 the spotlight was on the early years (ASER Early Years) where the survey explored a number of developmental indicators of young children from 4 to 8 years. As COVID struck the world, the ASER Wave 1 survey (September 2020) done on phone (with the cohort surveyed previously by ASER) captured the impact of the pandemic on children by exploring how families were supporting learning at home, their engagement with schools and teachers and the challenges associated with remote learning. It is important to acknowledge that this was (at that time) the only large-scale feedback that we got during the pandemic. As schools were gradually reopening (albeit in fits and starts), the 2021 ASER survey compared the change from 2020 (especially in areas where schools had not reopened) and in areas where schools had reopened, the focus was on children’s participation, COVID prevention measures and learning. This was also a phone-based survey.

Weaving large scale surveys of learning outcomes with small scale and in-depth studies has been the USP of ASER. As a result, over the last 17 years, the ASER team has enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the education system. It was among the first all-India (rural) studies to confirm that there is really no age-grade-learning correlation. Children may move up the grade ladder, but learning has been uneven. Even after reaching Std VIII, many children are not comfortable with grade 3 or 4 level competencies in language or mathematics.

The current ASER survey 2022 follows the 2018 survey. It will indeed be interesting to see how many children continue to be enrolled and attend school regularly, how the pandemic related lockdown has affected learning, how many children have not come back to school after lockdown, what could be the possible reasons for dropping out and finally what are the gender differences in rural India. We may also get a peek into the impact of school closures/school mergers and the impact of migration of people from urban to rural areas. The prevalence of tuitions may also tell us about ability of families to spend in a period of economic distress. That story may be particularly interesting.

This survey promises to be interesting and informative. Following the ASER story since 2005 has not only been fascinating, but a huge learning – for a person like me who has been engaged in in-depth qualitative work for a long time.

Looking back at ASER’s journey I always wished they would not only disaggregate their data by gender, but also look at social, religious and occupational identities that are known to influence educational participation as well as outcomes. Maybe we will be in for some great surprises – especially with respect to girls’ participation.

The selfish me sometimes wishes they would – some day – do a survey of school teachers to elicit their own understanding of why and how children learn or do not learn. Teacher beliefs inform their practices and getting an all-India (albeit rural only) sense of what teachers think about the ‘learning crisis’ (as it is popularly known) and what they could do and the barriers they face in ensuring every child learns at her/his own pace. Where, according to them are the bottlenecks?

Among the big challenges that ASER has faced since its inception in 2005 is acceptability across all stakeholders in government. Yes, ASER has, over the years, tried to maintain a dialogue with governments (central and state) and involve district level academic/teacher training institutions. However, it may be worthwhile to explore why some governments/officials were hostile while some other were positive and supportive.

Maybe I am asking too much of the ASER team – but they have shown remarkable courage to initiate audacious projects and surveys – maybe they will also take this on.