

## **PUNJAB : LUDHIANA AND FARIDKOT**

After a decade of surveying children's schooling status and basic learning levels, the ASER Centre is now focusing on an older age-group. Titled Beyond Basics, this new leg of the ASER survey aims at gaining an insight into the lives of 14-18 year olds – their aspirations, needs, future plans and goals.

The seventh pilot for Beyond Basics took place in May, 2017, when we ventured into randomly selected villages from two districts in each of the 16 states we visited. In Punjab, Ludhiana and Faridkot were the two chosen districts, where we would go and interact with children within our target age-group, their parents and other stakeholders, with the aim of understanding their larger context.

We met with about 25-30 youth in the two villages, interacted with them and asked them a bunch of questions about their day-to-day routines, their schools, the kinds of hobbies or sports they're interested in, and their ambitions. The experience turned out to be an eye-opener.

Unlike during the other pilots, when we would go into villages armed with formats and assessment tools, this time we walked into households hoping to unravel stories. Getting the youth to open up to us was a challenge initially, but when we explained to them why we were asking them questions and what we were aiming to do, they got talking. It became quite evident to us early on that most of these children had not thought about their future at all.

It was clear that the youth are going with the flow, taking things as they come. A majority of them were taken aback when we asked them about their plans for the future. Not only was it something they hadn't contemplated on, it appeared as though they think it is unnecessary for them to bother with planning at this stage in their lives.

Further probing about their future ambitions elicited responses such as “Jo rabb banawega ban jawage”. Some of them said they would like to grow up to join the army or the police forces, or become IPS officers. Except when we asked them if they knew what they had to do to achieve these goals, we were greeted with blank expressions.

Strangely enough, most of these youth did not have any hobbies. Some of the boys said they play games such as cricket, volleyball, kho kho, and the likes at school – and that was all.

It was extremely disheartening to realize that these bright young people, teeming with vigour were floating along, not headed in any particular direction. It isn't that they do not have resources available to them; it is the lack of guidance that is eating away at their ability to make informed choices about their future.

Our interactions with the parents of these youth revealed that despite having the best interest of their wards at heart, the fact that most of them were illiterate made it impossible for them to offer much guidance or show their children the way ahead. It was however heartening to know that most of the parents told us they would not be hesitant to send their children out of the village for further studies, or for work opportunities.

Another striking factor was that most of them were under the impression that studying till Std 12 would be enough for their kids to secure a job. The fact that their parents were so far removed from reality evidently made a difference to the ambitions of these youth on the brink of adulthood. It was apparent that even though the parents were ready to financially support their children so that they could continue their education, the lack of awareness about available opportunities made it impossible for them to guide their children.