

Piloted but dropped, Part 1: Mapping access to educational facilities outside the village

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More than 98% of India's villages have a primary school. Therefore, in the 'usual' ASER survey it is an easy task to find and visit the village school. Since ASER 'Beyond Basics' focuses on the 14-18 age group, we thought it was important to include the equivalent exercise for these older children – that is, understanding availability and access to middle/high/higher secondary school for youth in sampled villages.

But much lower proportions of villages have schools that offer higher grades. RMSA norms require a high school within a 5 km radius and a higher secondary school within a 7-10 km radius from a habitation. At the same time, private schools have mushroomed in many parts of the country. So we wanted to see whether we could systematically measure access to higher levels of education in India's villages.

Youth in the 14-18 age group could be doing many different things. They could be going to school, ITI/polytechnic, college, etc. Since Indian laws don't prohibit children age 14 and above from working in a non-hazardous environment, youth in our target population could also be working. As an initial exercise we started brainstorming on what facilities we were interested in and how to collect information on them if they were not located within the sampled village.

The desk work

The Census 2011 database gives an exhaustive list of facilities available within a village; and if not available, the status and distance of the nearest such facility available. The list includes schools, colleges, hospitals, library, internet cafe, post office, rural production centres, navigable waterways and many more. The drawback is that facilities coming up after 2011 are not listed.

DISE gives a list of all schools in the country and this data is updated every year. The list of all ITIs is also available in Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship website. The UGC gives a list of all colleges coming under section 2(f) and 12(B) of the UGC Act 1956.

The pilots

In the 'normal' ASER, survey teams physically confirm the presence within the village of the specific facilities of interest. But in 'Beyond Basics', these facilities were often not located within the sampled village at all. Having survey teams physically visit and confirm their location wasn't feasible.

So we tried asking people in the village. The facilities of interest – middle school, high school, higher secondary school, ITI, polytechnic (government and private), colleges (government and private medical/engineering/arts/science college) – were listed down from the Census 2011 database and surveyors were asked to collect information about them from people in the village. We tried a couple of different strategies.

The 1st pilot: Tamil Nadu, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Punjab

Through this pilot we wanted to see:

- What is the best way to capture facilities that are outside village?
- Is the response given by the village people when asked about these facilities reliable? If yes, who should these 'reliable people' be?
- Can google maps be used to find the distance between the village and the facility?
- Is it possible for the surveyors to carry out an external mapping activity?

In order to standardize the process, it was decided to get information on each facility from 4 different people – the Sarpanch of the village, HM of the government school present in the village, a shopkeeper and one more person of the surveyor's choice. The idea was to see if all these people give the same information on facilities available outside the village.

The data from this pilot was then compared with the Census data. The matching percentage across these states ranged from 22-66%. From this pilot, it was concluded that data from Census 2011 cannot be used to determine access in 2017. However, the main finding of this pilot was that the residents of the village give reliable information.

The 2nd pilot: Assam, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh

The format was redesigned and the surveyors collected information on the facilities from the Sarpanch and the HM of the government school in the village. This time they did not visit the facilities to confirm what they had been told.

It was again seen that in most villages, the responses of Sarpanch and HM matched for most facilities.

The final decision

Though the results from pilot 2 were encouraging, it was decided not to take this exercise forward keeping in mind the biases that might arise due to single stage sampling of the village. Also, as survey teams would not be able to physically observe and verify the location of the facilities, the validity and reliability of the data would not be strong enough. For these reasons, ASER 'Beyond Basics' does not include a visit to an educational or training facility relevant to the 14-18 age group.