

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Learning to “Measure What Affects their Lives”:  
Ethnography of a Citizen-Engaged Evaluation  
of Primary Education in India

by

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The *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)* evaluates primary education and children’s learning across rural districts of India. ASER is a *citizen-engaged evaluation*, relying on the participation of roughly 25,000 volunteers and over 500 partner organizations every year. ASER volunteers conduct village asset mapping, government school surveys, and household-based surveys and learning tests, which provide the only annual data on Indian children’s basic learning levels. The design and process of ASER directed by its central evaluation question:

“Are our children learning?” Because of its household-based approach, capacity-building components, and inclusion of volunteers and partners, ASER represents a unique model for social systems evaluation.

My ten-month ethnographic study is the first in-depth research on ASER’s design and the only study to date to analyze ASER as an evaluation model. To investigate ASER’s design and influence in India and globally, I utilized document analysis, field observations in three states, and drew upon interviews with ASER’s architects, funders, staff, volunteers, and partners. Given its geopolitical significance, its population’s diversity, and the scale of its civil society and government, India is an important context for research on evaluation—especially with respect to expanding current evaluation theories, which mostly derive from Western contexts and smaller scale evaluations.

My findings explain 1) why ASER was developed, 2) how ASER’s pioneering methodology was devised, 3) what implications ASER has for India’s education system and society, and 4) how ASER’s model for evaluation has gained global *design influence*. There are several ways to understand ASER’s significance—the impact of ASER’s results on educational policy and governance in India, the influence of ASER participation as a social process involving ordinary people and local institutions, and the popularity of ASER’s model for evaluation, which has been borrowed between countries and advocated by multilateral organizations.

Utilizing a three-paper structure, this dissertation illuminates ASER’s contribution to a culture of evaluation in India by examining ASER’s development, design, and process. This study theorizes the connection between evaluation, democratic governance, and citizen participation in

the improvement of India's rural primary education system and specifically, of children's learning across the country.

Read Melissa Rae Goodnight's full dissertation [here](#).