

# Ten years of ASER

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I am happy to see that ASER has completed the tenth consecutive year of its annual survey. ASER has made a great contribution to the discussions on our primary education policy. It has been successful, at least to some extent, in shifting the policy discourse from measuring inputs to asking for outcomes. Indeed, the fact that even in Parliament, over a dozen questions were asked about learning levels, testifies to the impact of these surveys.

It may be a bit disheartening to see the survey results every year and find that there is little improvement in learning levels among school children in India. On a few parameters, these surveys show that the overall learning levels have deteriorated over the years. This has happened despite a significant increase in government expenditure on school education and the enactment of the Right to Education Act.

However, it is in such a situation that a survey such as ASER is valuable. It shifts the focus from measuring how much the government is spending on education to whether children are learning. It also highlights the need to look at learning outcomes and not just at input norms such as availability of classrooms, teachers etc. After all, these inputs are means to an end, and unless we measure the desired outcome, we do not know the impact of the process being used.

The ASER survey also points out some fundamental problems with our public discourse. We have seen vigorous debate in the media on the curriculum in school text books. Recently, there was a debate related to whether the third language to be learnt can be a foreign language such as German. All these debates seem irrelevant when one finds that half the children in the fifth standard cannot read a simple story. It appears absurd to discuss the contents of text books if children are unable to acquire the basic skills to read them. And the third language debate is surreal if they cannot read even one language. The ability to read is the foundation on which all education rests. If this foundation does not exist, there is no point in debating the content and structure of the curriculum. The story is even bleaker when it comes to numerical skills. The ASER surveys tell us that three-fourths of all children in the fifth standard cannot do simple division.

If India has to reap its demographic dividend and grow out of poverty, it has to enable its next generation to pick up the requisite skills to work in a globalising economy. This cannot happen unless they have the basic ability to read, write and do arithmetic. The ASER surveys tell us that we have a long way to go in these areas, and that our education policy has to first focus on bridging this gap. That there is hardly any improvement on these indicators over the last decade is a pointer to how misplaced our elementary education policy continues to be.

I do not know how difficult it is to bridge this gap. Pratham says that its Read India campaign can do this work for Rs 30,000 per year per village. Given that there are about six lakh villages in the country, the total cost according to this estimate is about Rs 2,000 crore. Even if this estimate is off by a factor of 10, availability of public funding does not appear to be the constraint as Rs 20,000 crore is less than 0.2% of GDP. Currently, we spend over Rs 1 lakh crore per year of public funds on primary education every year, so it should not be too difficult to restructure these funds or to augment the amount to ensure that the basic skills are built. So where does the problem lie? My guess is that there is limited appreciation of the problem within the government and the urgency needed to address this.

A quick look at the answers given to parliamentary questions over the last couple of years - by both the previous government and the current one - reveals the attitude of the government towards this issue. While the previous government dismissed the ASER reports as "cursory assessments", the current government has called it "a study without a robust methodology". Talk about ostriches and sand.

This brings me to what I think ASER should do in the years ahead. I believe that the work has been well begun but is by no means complete. While it is important to continue to measure the progress of learning levels, it is equally important to have a greater level of public discussion on the topic. This can be done only through a

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vigorous campaign of dissemination of the results coupled with discussions on its importance and ways to fix the problem.

While the ASER survey measures outcomes in basic education, we need outcome based evaluation of many other social welfare parameters. For example, the government has launched the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, which includes a campaign to build more toilets. The outcome desired is to reduce open defecation, which is a key element towards improving health and nutrition indicators. Building toilets is a necessary but not sufficient condition; increasing usage of toilets may involve several other variables including availability of water and solid waste disposal, cultural and social factors etc. The final outcome, that of percentage of people who defecate in the open, needs to be tracked in order to evaluate progress in the scheme. One can think of similar outcome parameters across a range of areas (incidence of disease rather than vaccination coverage, crop yield rather than fertiliser use etc.) that should supplement the current measurement of outlays and outputs.

One hopes that the government starts measuring outcomes on a regular basis. It does conduct surveys such as those done by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) which measure outcomes. However, most of these surveys are not conducted on an annual basis; for example, the last NFHS was for 2005-06, and the next one is for 2014-15. Even data on unemployment or poverty rates is collected by NSSO only once every five years. We need data at more frequent intervals to assess the effectiveness of various policy measures.

In the absence of the government system responding to this need, civil society groups could act as an independent audit system for the effectiveness of government programmes. Large scale surveys on various outcome parameters could help bring focus on the progress and effectiveness of various interventions. ASER has built the skills needed to conduct these surveys and could perhaps, help other groups conduct surveys in other sectors.

I shall conclude with expressing my deep admiration for the work done by ASER. I would urge them to continue to expand their work, both in terms of creating greater public awareness on education outcomes and in creating (or supporting) outcome surveys on other social and economic areas.