

# *Where do we want to be? By when?*

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This third ASER indicates major progress over last two years in enrollment and provision of schools, teachers, toilets, and water supply in most states. The jump observed in mid-day meals provision is truly remarkable. What we estimate is not a small achievement by any measure. Needs assessment, plans, and systematic work backed up with continuous, steady, and timely supply of funds up to the village level through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) systems is an important factor that should be underscored. The increase in aanganwadi ICDS coverage, especially in the North, is also impressive.

The message is clear. Focus works. Goal setting works. Planning works. Continuity works. Where there is no focus, no goal setting, no planning for improvement, and where there is no continuity, progress is sketchy at best.

People want better education for children. There is already enough evidence of this. However, when we asked if children go to paid tuition classes the response surprised us. In West Bengal, Orissa, Kerala, and Bihar four very different states the proportion of children going for tuitions is the highest. The proportion of government school children going for tuitions is the highest (30-60%) in these states. Himachal, Chattisgarh, UP, MP are among the ones where tuition-going children are the fewest. Tuitions cannot be blamed on a poor school system alone. The proportion of private school children who go for tuitions is almost double that of their government school friends. All we can say is that people will try every way to get a better education for their children. There is no evidence that tuitions really make a difference.

There is a need to plan for quality education. One major flaw in SSA is that plans are made from year to year. This may be fine for civil works and recruitment of teachers but not for overall improvement in quality of education which requires continuous focused work involving creative human involvement in every class. Considering that money supply is assured and even the new center-state sharing ratio is now agreed upon, the union and the state governments should prepare a three year plan to improve learning outcomes with clear goals, strategies, timelines, periodic measurement of performance, and expenditure. This is hardly difficult to do and it is critical if we want to improve quality.

We must decide what we want to achieve, by when, and go after it. Here are some clear agenda items.

## Starting early and one KG class in school is a must:

The ASER measurement happens in the middle of the academic year. By this time in 2006 38.2% children in class I could not even identify alphabets. One year later, in the new cohort, nearly 6.3 percentage points more children in class I nationwide can read alphabets or text. This change is visible in most states. It is noteworthy that the proportion of the children who cannot even identify alphabets is almost exactly the same as children who cannot even identify numbers 1-9. Given the vastly increased ICDS network, it should be possible to take up a summer "school preparation" exercise for children entering class I and class II to impact early literacy and numeracy. Such summer voluntary campaigns taken up in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar have borne excellent results.

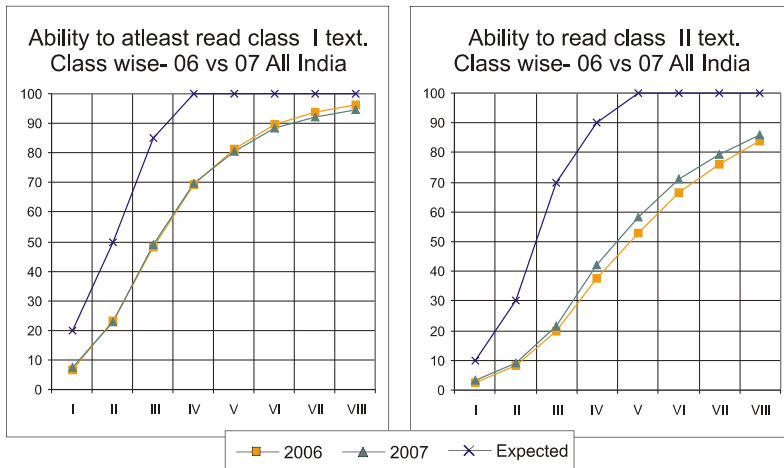
The "school preparatory class" is an interim measure. In reality, there is another factor that is growing. The proportion of 5 year olds entering schools has risen by about 15 percentage points over the last year and now 62% 5 year olds are enrolled in schools. These children are too young to be in school. They tend to dropout and re-enroll thus contributing to the dropout rate.

It is time we created a national policy to have KG classes government schools for 5 year olds so that the children get systematic early childhood education. They need a good start before joining class I.

Learning reading, writing, arithmetic:

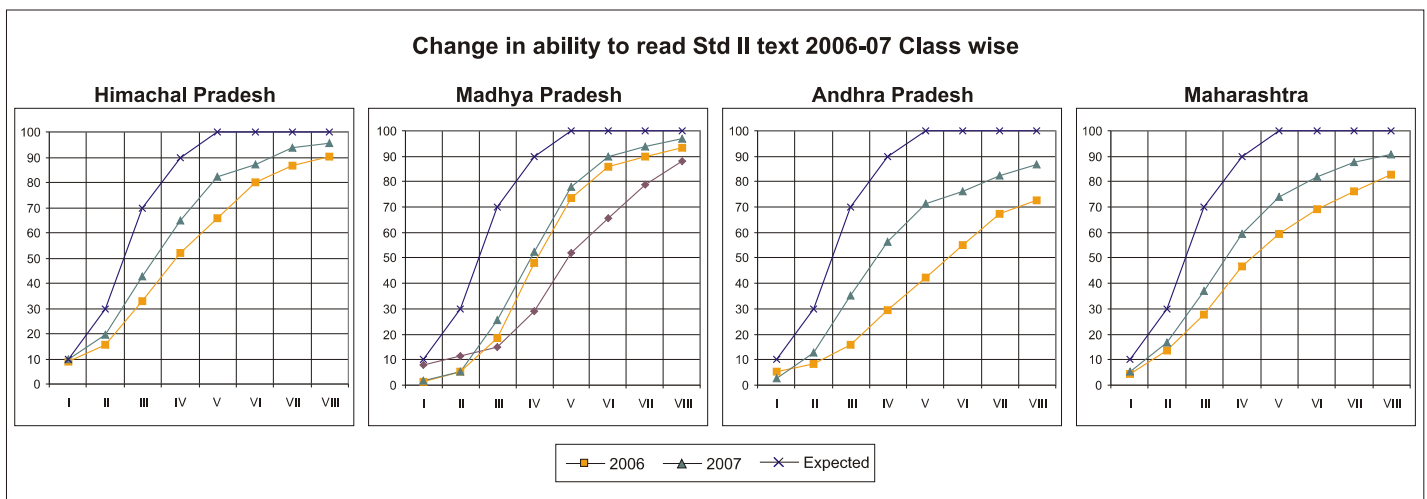
Over the last two years the Government of India, the Minister for HRD, and the Prime Minister himself have communicated to the states that learning of basic skills have to be improved. Several states have responded well and some improvement in the area of reading is visible. However, as a nation we still have to go into a mission mode to improve learning in our schools.

The all India charts below show my “expectation” of what proportion of children should be able to read class I or class II in comparison with the situation in 2006 and 2007.



The ASER2007 report has decoratively used some pages of class I and class II textbooks from different states. Since we supply these textbooks, it is reasonable to expect children to be able to read at these levels in these classes. The India-wide situation shows that in the middle of the class III academic year, only 50% children can read a class I text. In the middle of class IV academic year only 40% children can read a class II text. While the proportion of children who can read class I text reaches 80% by the middle of class V, it takes the middle of class VII for 80% children to be able to read a class II text.

ASER2006 estimated a big jump over 2005 in the proportion of children who could read class I and class II text. There was some disbelief and some skepticism about the reported increase. Between 2006 and 2007, some more states have shown a similar jump. Andhra Pradesh and Himachal, one starting with a low baseline and the other starting at a higher have both shown that rapid progress is possible. A look at the Madhya Pradesh chart shows a big jump between 2005 and 2006 and a small increase in 2007.



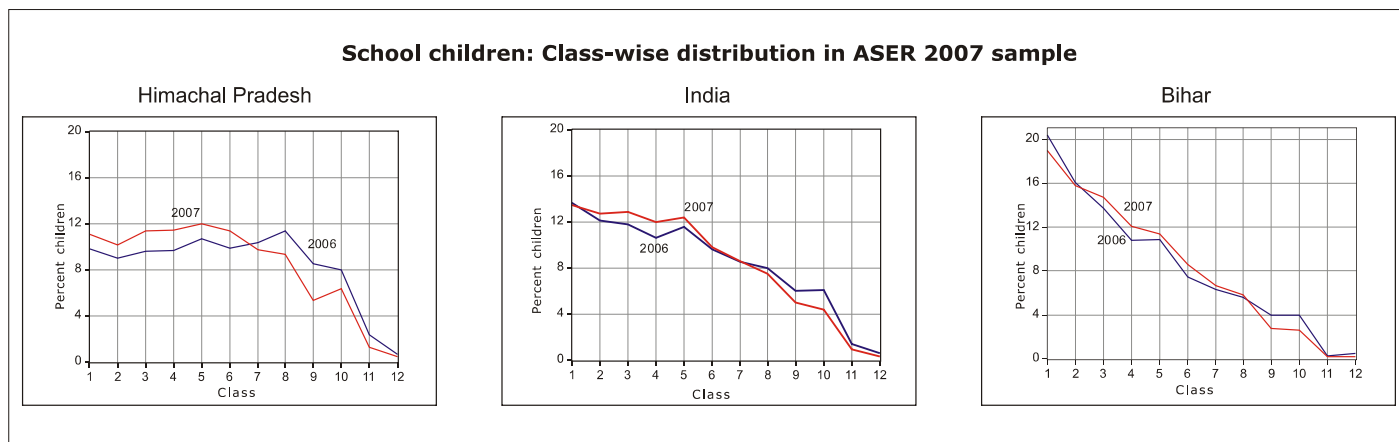
The first lesson from the above graphs is that big jumps in children’s ability to read are possible within one year or less. The second lesson comes from the Madhya Pradesh chart. While the state made a big jump between 2005 and 06, the next year did not see an energetic follow up to further improve upon the situation thanks to some discontinuity. What Andhra Pradesh and Himachal have achieved this year has to be built upon further.

In case of Arithmetic, similar improvements are possible. The states have not begun to focus on arithmetic as yet and the lack of improvement is visible in ASER2007.

### Universal upper primary education :

The fulfillment of the fundamental right to education demands that all children complete eight years of education by the time they are fourteen. The problem of provision of upper primary education has to be solved urgently in many states.

This report carries charts showing class-wise distribution of children in the sample. A quick look at these charts in the report for each state is enough to say if the state is more like Himachal, or Bihar, or in between.



Ideally, if all children who enter at Std I transition to the next class year after year, we should see a more or less horizontal line of proportion of children against the class as seen in the Himachal chart. Bihar is the exact opposite. However, since over 90% children in Bihar are now enrolled in schools, the chart indicates that large proportions of children are enrolled in much lower classes not appropriate for their age. At class I, II, and III, these children constitute nearly 25% of the class. While near 100% children in Himachal will complete at least eight years of education by the time they are 14, Bihar has a long way to go if we follow the run of the mill linear path, which is not useful in what is clearly a crisis situation. Special measures to allow older children to learn basic skills rapidly and leapfrog into the more age-appropriate classes may be a practical solution.

The India chart indicates that universal retention up to Std V is within reach. With some purposeful, innovative steps in addition to constructing schools and appointing teachers, there is no reason why we should not be able to achieve true UEE in less than a decade.

There is much to be done but we do recognize that much has been done, which is not appreciated by people outside and often also by those inside the government. ASER is a citizen's initiative and it does not fit into the "watch dog" stereotype because this report is not about watching. It is about observing, attempting to change, measuring to see if change has occurred, and go on trying.

Exactly one year ago, at the function to release ASER2006, young people from every state of India took a pledge in their state language to ensure that all children in their state would learn to read, write, and do basic arithmetic by the end of 2009. The Read India campaign was born. It has begun to take shape since July 2007 and reached over 250,000 schools and villages mostly in collaboration with state governments but in some cases without.

ASER and Read India are two aspects of the same effort. With planned, focused, continuous government action in collaboration, there is no reason why we should not succeed before the end of the decade.