

## IS IT WORKING?

Dr. Madhav Chavan<sup>1</sup>

There is every indication that even the poorest of India want education for their children. The question is whether governments, and their arms that are charged with the responsibility of providing education, are doing their work.

In physics, work is said to be done when a force moves an object through a distance. Mere application of force does not constitute work.

So, is the education system in India “working”? This is what we have been trying to track over the last four years. The UPA government came to power and declared its emphasis on transparency and on outcomes rather than mere outlays. It also took the welcome step of imposing a 2% cess on all Central taxes so that more force could be added to the ongoing efforts to change the status of education in India. The lack of current, country-wide, reliable, and independently measured information that is easy to understand provided the motivation for ASER in late 2005 when we sensed that in spite of the accepted ideals there was little movement on the governmental side to provide such information.

Four years is a long time in the life of a child, in the life of a school, in the life of a country. Over the last four years, the proportion of children out of school has dropped substantially although as the Government of India-commissioned study of 2007-08 and reports from ASER indicate, increased enrollment has yet to translate into a habit of going to school, especially in some of the Northern states. Alternatively, poor attendance is an indication of schools not functioning. Massive teacher recruitment has happened in a short time in many states and the pupil teacher ratio has improved substantially, at least at the state level. We have included in the annexures tables of approved outlays, expenditure, and some indicators such as PTR, % out of school children, and % children in Std I not knowing alphabets over three years. A state-by-state review by the reader is possible. For the first time, ASER has included an article on financing of education for the reader’s ready reference.

So, the massive infusion of funds, construction of schools, recruitment of teachers, teacher training programs, mid-day meals, provision of textbooks, and such other actions constitute building up of the ‘force’. The question still remains, is this force working against the forces of inertia to move education to higher levels?

It is often said that the impact of education takes a long time to show. In some ways this is obvious and true since a school-going child becomes a productive contributor to the economy and society only after eight or ten years. But, we have already spent four years. What have we achieved? And, how to measure progress? What tools to use? How frequently to measure?

ASER has chosen some simple tools and an annual measurement of learning levels at the very basic level. We test children even in Std V and above to see if they can read a Std II level text. We see if children in Std I can read paragraphs, but if they cannot, we go lower and check whether they can read simple words; if they cannot even do that we see if they know letters. Our assessment of arithmetic is similar.

Over the years, several independent researchers have used ASER tools and found them to work. We also see that several governments are now testing reading at a basic level. Some use ASER-like tools and some do not.

The annual use of this simple and rapid form of testing using over 20,000 volunteers mobilized and trained every year has indicated where change has happened and

States	NCERT 2007 Std V comprehension "facility value". Read text, read question, answer on paper	ASER 2007 % Std V children who can answer questions based on Std II text orally	CERT/ASER
Jammu and Kashmir	37.97	32.79	1.16
Himachal Pradesh	51.5	74.71	0.69
Uttarakhand	42.9	64.18	0.67
Punjab	46.86	67.29	0.70
Haryana	46.69	63.61	0.73
Rajasthan	42.29	44.29	0.95
Uttar Pradesh	47.03	41.62	1.13
Bihar		64.14	
Jharkand	48.96	53.52	0.91
West Bengal	55.19	61.48	0.90
Assam	41.07	51.43	0.80
Gujarat	43.99	52.05	0.85
Maharashtra	49.95	71.08	0.70
Madhya Pradesh	48.77	74.57	0.65
Chattisgarh	39.48	54.15	0.73
Orissa	51.9	55.34	0.94
Andhra Pradesh	35.59	68.28	0.52
Karnataka	39.71	48.08	0.83
Kerala	51.93	74.83	0.69
Tamil Nadu	44.39	37.08	1.20
India	45.3	57.1	0.79

<sup>1</sup> CEO and President, Pratham

Table 1: Comparison pf ASER2007 with NCERT-MAS- Comprehension

where it has not. Tools that aim too high cannot capture the changes happening at the basic level under their radar. The simplicity of the tool enables ASER to capture even small changes effectively.

This raises the question that is asked in some quarters: how good is the ASER tool and technique? Perhaps comparing ASER results with other national level measurements will help answer the question.

The NCERT conducted a mid-term assessment survey of learning outcomes of Std V children some time in 2007. It reports a “facility value” for comprehension which is based on a child reading a ‘story’, reading questions based on it, and

writing the answers. ASER2007 published numbers of children who could orally answer questions based on a Std II level ‘story’ regardless of their reading ability and the class in which they studied. The comparison, shown in Table 1, is quite close considering that one test requires written answers and the other oral.

States	Census 2001: Rural Female Literacy	ASER2006- rural: % women who can read	
		age 7-80	age 17-80
Andhra Pradesh	43.5	68.6	62.5
Assam	50.7	62.7	60.4
Bihar	29.6	44.6	32.1
Chhatisgarh	47.0	60.0	54.3
Goa	71.9	76.5	72.6
Gujarat	47.8	57.4	47.0
Haryana	49.3	60.5	48.3
Himachal	65.7	72.1	66.8
J & K	36.7	60.2	50.2
Jharkhand	29.9	51.7	37.8
Karnataka	48.0	50.9	45.0
Kerala	86.7	89.3	90.3
Madhya Pradesh	42.8	54.9	38.5
Maharashtra	58.4	64.1	56.3
Manipur*	57.0	69.5	70.8
Meghalaya	53.2	72.3	75.1
Mizoram	77.3	80.9	79.3
Nagaland	57.5	64.3	65.2
Orissa	46.7	57.8	49.7
Punjab	57.7	65.2	61.1
Rajasthan	37.3	68.7	62.6
Tamil Nadu	55.3	55.2	49.9
Uttar Pradesh	36.9	45.7	34.3
Uttarakhand	54.7	68.8	59.6
West Bengal	53.2	63.4	54.9
D & N Haveli	30.8	53.8	38.6
Daman Diu	59.3	70.1	62.6
Pondicherry	64.4	59.8	57.6
<b>INDIA</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>56.6</b>	<b>47.7</b>

The second comparison is on female literacy. People often wonder what Census of India means by literacy and dismiss it as a mere ability to sign one’s name. Table 2 compares rural female literacy of 2001 with ability of women in the age group 7+ or 17+ as recorded by ASER2006. Over 550,000 older women and nearly 250,000 school-age girls from over 16,000 villages form the sample from practically all states and rural districts of India. Once again, the national rural female literacy number of 46.13 matches closely with ASER’s figure of 47.7% women in the 17-80 age group being able to read at least simple sentences. The proportion for the 7-80 age group is much higher because school going girls are able to read more. This number -- 56.61% female readers -- is a predictor of India’s rural female literacy. We expect female literacy to go up to 60% by 2010. If girls learn to read better over the next two years, it could be higher by a couple of percentage points.

ASER2006 showed a big jump in learning in Madhya Pradesh. Unfortunately, neither the MP government, nor anyone else took this improvement, or what caused it, seriously at the time. There were doubts raised about how good ASER was in measuring learning. ASER2008 once again shows huge jumps in MP and Chhattisgarh and some improvement in other states. More importantly, it shows no improvement in many states.

ASER is not the platform to discuss what has caused the observed changes. We simply record that whatever force that was applied has caused a movement against inertia. That indicates that something has “worked”.

It is important to note what has worked, where efforts have failed to work, and where there were no efforts. ASER provides evidence. If governments do not take a serious note of it, they could be accused of dereliction of duty.

Unfortunately, no one asks for resignations if children’s learning does not improve. It is time that we do.