

ASER started in October 2005 as a result of the UPA government's 2% education cess on all central taxes. The logic was that citizens should monitor the impact of their extra tax and, if possible, hold the government responsible.

Actually, this is the role of the people's representatives. But, given the way our legislature functions, people's representatives do not hold the government accountable except when it presents a political opportunity. It is another matter that they do not want to be held accountable either. The UPA 1 government did declare that it would like to see outcomes over outlays and attempted to get all departments to generate outcome budgets. It is not clear if the idea of outcome budgets has worked at all.

The President of India, in her speech in June 2009, soon after UPA 2 took charge, declared that her government would bring out five annual reports on the subjects of education, health, employment, environment, and infrastructure. We have not heard about it since then. Perhaps we should wait and find out if it was a genuine declaration or whether the speech writer goofed up.

What has India achieved in the last five years in elementary education? The numbers of schools and classrooms built is staggering. No mean achievement. The number of teachers hired is quite large in many of the states. Not an easy task. Mainly as a result of the above two, the enrollment rate in schools has gone up substantially.

But, it is necessary to look at these achievements closely.

While enrollment- the registration of children in school rosters- has improved, the attendance rate of children has not improved. Although enrollment is nearing 96% in Bihar, the attendance in Bihar schools averages still under 60%. Is that true enrollment? Bihar is not alone in this. Excepting Himachal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Nagaland, and Maharashtra, in all other states, attendance is about 15% to 30% lower than the enrollment rate. The average attendance rate is the true enrollment rate of a state. In India, the average attendance rate seems to be around 75% on any given day.

So, for elementary education to be truly universal, most children need to be in school most of the time. Hence, attendance has to be improved and monitored. Who will do this? The Right to Education Act talks of compulsory attendance. Who will compel the children to come to school? How?

Now, what about learning? ASER has been monitoring if basic learning levels of children are improving. What do we mean by improvement in learning outcomes? How do we measure it?

% Children in ASSAM who can at least read a Std I level text			
	2007	2008	2009
Std I	6.6	7.3	6.7
Std II	23.8	21.3	20.2
Std III	49.0	42.2	41.1
Std IV	69.1	64.5	60.7
Std V	80.5	73.2	71.0

Various states have now started measuring learning levels of children. Usually a baseline of students is done at the beginning of the year and an endline at the end of the year. The difference between endline and baseline is taken to be the improvement in learning. It cannot be denied that this constitutes progress, but does it indicate that the learning process has become more effective? Is the learning process in 2009 more productive that it was in, say, 2007? Take the example of Assam and look at the proportion of children who could read at Std 1 level in different years. In 2007, the percentage of children in Std 2 who could read at that level was 23.8%. This cohort moved to Std 3 in 2008 and the proportion of children who could read (Std 1 level text) went to 42.2% - an increase of 18.4%. In the Std 2 cohort of 2008, on the other hand, 19.8% more children learnt to read in going to Std 3 in 2009.

So, while the absolute number of Std 3 readers in 2009 appears to have reduced over 2008 and 2007, the actual process of improvement is more or less the same in 2008-09 than in 2007-08. But, if the ASSAM government were to measure the reading ability of Std 2 children early in the academic year, and then again at the end of the academic year, they would find that about 18-19% more children have learnt to read. This could be misunderstood as a major success but in fact it would be nothing more than what was being achieved all the previous years. And the fact is that regardless of the year, the proportion of children in Std 3 who can read at Std 1 level is still less than 50%. Year after year, children remain at least two grade levels behind where they need to be if they are going to make satisfactory progress through the primary stage.

The process of learning can be said to have improved when results in the next cohort show more children improving within a period than the previous cohort. The ASER results over last five years indicate that whenever states focused on learning outcomes, the effectiveness of the process improved over the previous year. When this focus is lost, the effectiveness decreases. The case of Chhattisgarh, which lost its focus in early 2009, clearly indicates that while the state did not quite go back to the learning levels of 2007, the 2009 results are well below those of 2008. In many states, the process of learning has remained either as ineffective as before or in some cases, it has become worse.

It is almost predictable that the Right to Education Act, the way it is framed, will lead to distraction from learning outcomes. In a centralized scheme of things, the priority focus of the state-governments will determine what the ground level will do or not do.

In the latest circulars that guide the formulation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's Annual Work Plans at district and state levels, the Government of India has sent a Results Framework for SSA Goals. The outcome indicators refer to enrollment not attendance, to provision of toilets rather than to whether toilets function, to water provision rather than on whether water is available. After 17 such "outcome" indicators, the 18<sup>th</sup> item is "State level sample Learning Achievement Surveys (designed in the spirit of RTE for the purpose of checking health of system)". It is not clear what warranted the content in the brackets. No other indicator is honored with such a bracket. Aren't all outcome indicators supposed to "check the health of the system"? It appears that SSA is being apologetic about this; it is also an effort to dilute learning achievement as not so important. Learning outcomes are not mentioned in RTE document. It certainly is not important to the letter of the law and whether the spirit will survive will depend entirely upon the pressure on the government.

So, whether in letter or in spirit, given the record of Indian government in implementing any law, the real responsibility of giving the child her right to education will ultimately rest with the citizen.

ASER 2009	Based on household survey data	Observed on a random day in the school year in all government schools	
States	Total school enrollment (Age 6-14) in all schools (govt+pvt)	Primary schools Std 1-4/5 : % enrolled children attending (average)	Upper primary schools Std 1-7/8 : % enrolled children attending (average)
Goa	99.8	96.4	92.2
Kerala	99.9	91.9	91.7
Tamil Nadu	99.1	91.7	90.1
Maharashtra	99.0	90.6	90.6
Himachal Pradesh	99.3	90.4	90.2
Karnataka	96.8	88.0	79.6
Jammu and Kashmir	98.2	86.7	90.0
Arunachal Pradesh	96.6	86.0	88.0
Mizoram	98.7	85.8	85.9
Sikkim	97.7	84.8	88.5
Punjab	94.6	84.4	86.1
Uttarakhand	98.7	84.2	76.3
Nagaland	97.6	84.1	87.1
Haryana	96.9	83.7	84.9
Gujarat	95.7	83.5	83.1
Chhattisgarh	96.7	76.7	73.3
Tripura	98.1	76.2	71.1
Andhra Pradesh	93.9	76.0	77.3
Meghalaya	96.2	75.6	80.5
Orissa	93.7	74.4	72.9
Manipur	98.9	74.0	77.1
Rajasthan	93.4	72.0	74.0
Assam	95.7	70.6	66.1
Madhya Pradesh	97.7	67.9	67.1
Jharkhand	94.6	62.8	63.6
West Bengal	94.3	65.9	66.4
Uttar Pradesh	95.1	59.8	60.9
Bihar	96.0	57.4	57.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>96.0</b>	<b>74.2</b>	<b>76.6</b>