

The training of ASER volunteers was over. It was evening in Gauriganj - a block town in Sultanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. More than seventy young people had attended the two day training. On the first day there were many questions about what exactly needed to be done. But with enough practice in the field, and enough discussions, by the end of the second day, most people were clear.

Two people are needed in each ASER team. Each team is assigned a village. Each team gets a “village pack” of survey sheets, testing tools and instructions. The training focuses on what to do in a village and then in a household. In each district, a local group gets together to “do” ASER. The local group also disseminates findings. Local engagement and ownership are important if this assessment is to lead to action.

The training hall began to empty out. There was a buzz in the air, as if an important homework assignment had been handed out. A young woman came up to me as everyone was leaving. She could not have been more than twenty. Shyly, she requested a word in private. Softly she said, “I have never been anywhere other than my home and college without someone from the family with me. I am very nervous. I really want to go to the village for the survey. But I am very worried about how I will talk to the people there. Do you think they will listen to someone like me? Will I be able to do what you want me to do?” Her shining eyes and quivering voice communicated her mixed feelings: the desire to try something new as well as her anxiety at the prospect.

I had observed this girl for two days, both in the training hall and in the practice session in a nearby village. She was an attentive and intelligent participant in the training process. Softly, I made a suggestion. “Go home and get your entire family to sit down. Tell them what you have learned about ASER and what you are going to do. If you can convince your family about ASER, then you can convince anyone anywhere.”

A vast range of people participate in ASER, both as individuals and as institutions. We estimate that 25,000 to 30,000 volunteers and maybe 500 organizations and institutions participate in each year’s survey. For example, Bihar has 37 districts. In five years, 105 organizations have participated. In all likelihood, since 2005, over 10,000 people have been involved with carrying out ASER in Bihar alone. We think that over five years at least 100,000 people across India have been part of ASER in one form or another.

All that an ASER volunteer gets is a certificate of appreciation and a nominal sum of money to cover the costs of going to a village in their district and back home. Neither the organization nor the individual has any monetary incentive to participate in ASER. Although the actual involvement is for four days – two days in training and two days in a village, it is hard work and needs commitment and a sense of adventure.

Feedback sessions at district level are full of stories of challenges and discoveries. One year we got a phone call from Leh district in Ladakh from two young surveyors who said that although their village was listed in the Indian census, local people were telling them that it was in China. Last year, in the random sample of villages in Chandel district in Manipur, there were some villages that were easier to access via Myanmar. A young girl and her companion set off on a motorcycle across international borders to complete their ASER task. In remote villages, people are surprised that someone has made the effort to come all the way to find out how their children are doing. Far from the border areas, even in the Hindi heartland, volunteers are often very shocked to find that there are villages in their own district that take more than a day from the district headquarters to reach.

In many ways ASER reflects realities on the ground. The growing Naxalite presence was felt in this year’s ASER. As the ASER surveyors were returning from Joratarai village of Nagri block in Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh, some Naxalites stopped and questioned them and eventually destroyed the survey reports. Apart from the danger, the two surveyors were distraught that their two days of hard work had gone waste. From the beginning of ASER, Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh has never been done. This year there were problems in Malkangiri, Raygada and Sundargarh districts in Orissa. Political disturbances affected ASER work in large parts of Hooghly district in West Bengal where it was hard to find people who were willing to go to villages in specific parts of the district. Similarly in Garwah in Jharkhand and N.C. Hills in Assam.

In the first year of ASER, existing organizations and networks were approached in many states. Many of these organizations such as Gram Vikas in Orissa, Kudumbashree in Kerala, Kheti Virasat in Punjab were not involved in education but considered primary education to be an essential service that needed citizen participation and support. Other networks such as Abhivyakti in Madhya Pradesh, Sankalp in Chhattisgarh, Navbharat Jagriti Kendra in Jharkhand, Voluntary Forum for Education in Bihar, and the Kalvi network in Tamil Nadu were involved in education. Some of these early partners have continued with ASER for the last five years.

In many states there has been a steady and lasting involvement of district degree colleges over this five year period. Many students in these colleges are from villages in the district. Across the North East, in Jammu-Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa and West Bengal, participation from colleges and students has been high. In Arunachal Pradesh there are very few colleges; here high school students are involved in ASER. The “doing” of ASER inevitably raises many questions: in district after district, students raise basic questions about sampling, about tools and about analysis. Much of the college participation in ASER is done as part of social service requirements in NSS. And yet analyzing the last five years of experiences with district colleges, it is obvious that “learning by doing” could be included in the curriculum of such colleges. Such “project based” short duration exercises can be useful on two counts. For students, this is a chance to build capacity and integrate theory and practice as well life skills like self confidence, communication and time management. For the institution, it is an opportunity to provide vital information and analysis and get engaged in the process of development in their district. Why only education, all social sector programs in India need systematic and active analysis and engagement for improvement. To make institutions of higher education more relevant and vibrant, links to the ground and connections to the field can only be productive.

The participation of universities in ASER has also been interesting. While it has been difficult to interest high profile universities in metros to participate, individual professors in regional universities have been quick to take the opportunity to build stronger links with research or with teaching. Manipal University’s rural development department has used the ASER platform to conduct further research studies. NEHU-Tura is another example where ASER has been the starting point for deeper investigations. Jammu University’s communication department used ASER to provide opportunities for exposure to more remote areas. Martin Luther University in Meghalaya gives academic credit to students who participate in ASER.

Andhra Pradesh has provided one of the most remarkable cases in the short history of ASER. In the first two years of ASER, 2005 and 2006, Loksatta organization coordinated and led ASER across the state. Although their primary focus as an organization has been on electoral reform, their participation in ASER was based on the idea that this kind of peoples’ initiative is important and that education is an important field of activity. Loksatta organization continues to be a strong supporter of ASER and is very helpful in disseminating ASER findings in the state.

Since 2007, DIETs in Andhra have done ASER in their own districts.¹ This is a model that can be adopted in other states too. Each DIET has more than 200 students enrolled in a two year course. ASER provides an excellent learning opportunity for these future primary school teachers of the district. Students experience “learning” problems first hand and hopefully this also gives them a chance to analyze what can be done and perhaps to build a foundation for effective teaching and learning. Several DIET principals have told me that while the usual teacher training curriculum makes trainees do practice teaching in the district’s schools, only ASER makes them spend time in the village and in children’s homes. It should be possible to build in ASER like rapid assessments into the normal curriculum and activities of the DIET that could feed into the annual work plan and review process of a district under SSA.

The other major actors in ASER are a wide range of non-government organizations. Here too there are significant variations across regions. In states like Maharashtra and Gujarat where local governance is strong and active, local level organizations seem to be more rooted and confident. Still, even here there are needs and demands for continued learning. Often in small or local NGOs, the field level staff does not get opportunities for professional development. ASER gives them the chance to learn something new and to do something outside of their usual work.

So, one major learning from ASER is that India has many people who are willing to participate both to learn and to help to change what is around them, provided what needs to be done is simple to do and easy to understand. For individuals, it is a chance to travel, to learn, to discover themselves and to explore their surroundings. For institutions, ASER provides a learning platform whose potential is visible but needs to be further explored and institutionalized.

¹ DIET stands for District Institute for Education Training. These are district level government institutions for pre-service and in-service teacher training.

The challenge that lies before us all is how to channel this vast citizen energy and interest into effective action for outcomes. On the one hand, the question is how to build substantive “learning-by-doing” into such exercises so that individuals benefit. On the other hand, the task is also to translate the raw energy of people into structured pressure for responsibility and outcomes.

ASER has taught us some very basic lessons. People in India care. People are generous with their time. People of India are ready. The need of the hour is to create mechanisms to learn and to act, to build capacities of citizens - individuals and institutions, and to strengthen the forces demanding accountability.

It gets dark early in rural areas; or so it feels in Gauriganj. I was about to turn in for the night when there was a loud knock on my door. Two excited people burst into the room. One was familiar – the shy hesitant girl from the training. The quiver in her voice was gone and her eyes were shining even more brightly. She had brought her sister-in-law along to report back to me. “it was exactly as you said”, the young girl gushed. “I had a hard time getting my family to all sit down. But once I told them about ASER properly, they listened to me. And now they all want to do ASER”.

