

Not far from the village primary school, there was a group of women. I started chatting with them. "How is the education in this school?" I asked. "I send my children to school" said one lady. "I even send my son and daughter to tuition and buy them books." Several women joined the conversation. "How do you know if your child is learning well?" I wanted to know. "How can we tell?" they said. "We are not literate. But we send our children to school and we send them to tuition also. So they must be learning."

It was a mild November day in Rohtas district in south-western Bihar. Rohtas is known as the rice bowl of the state. Canals criss-cross the district. The rice fields were green and stretched in all directions. Our village was in the Dehri block. It was afternoon. School was over. Children had come home, left their books and bags and were playing outside. Women sat in the sun cleaning rice and talking to each other. It felt good to sit in the afternoon sunshine. It was a good time for conversations.

I had been asking children to come and read. What I had were several sets of reading tasks - letters, words, simple paragraphs and a short 8-10 line story - all in big black font, printed on white paper. Children were curious. I had been sitting on the edge of the women's group. Children crowded around me, some looking over my shoulder, some from the side. All of the texts contained basic, simple and familiar words that are easy to spell, everyday words, sentences and contexts that children could relate to. Nothing more than what is in the Std II textbook. Everyone tried to read. Many could read the letters and some could read the words, only a few managed to read the paragraph and the story.

The women watched their children's attempts. There was a woman in a blue sari. Her daughter was in Std 4 and could not read. "Do you know if your child can read this?" I asked the blue sari mother. "How am I supposed to know?" she argued back. "I myself cannot read." "Which of these are the hardest to read, do you think?" I continued, pointing to the letters, words and sentences. "I don't know. I am illiterate," she answered, somewhat irritated. "Look at the paper, look at these things, what seems easy and what seems difficult?" Now my blue sari mother became adamant. "Why are you forcing me? I told you I cannot read." On the sidelines, her eight year old daughter was enjoying the interaction. Perhaps she was enjoying it because the tables were turned. She began to persuade her mother to focus on the paper. With some hesitation on her side and much encouragement from her daughter, the lady adjusted her pallu on her head and leaned over. "This one must be easy", she said, pointing to the letters, "because many children could do it. That one (pointing to the story) is not easy because even bigger children could not do it."

"Okay", I persisted. "Do you know when your child has a fever?" "Of course!!!" She looked at me in surprise; all mothers know when their child is sick. "What do you do when your child has a fever?" I asked her. The blue sari mother replied instantly. "That's simple. I feel her forehead. If it is hot then I know she has a fever. I do some simple things at home. If in two or three days the fever does not go down, I take her to the doctor. I can even take her to a private doctor. I ask the doctor for some medicine. After another few days if the fever does not go down then I will take her back to the same doctor and fight with him....." "So you have an MBBS degree" I said. "What is that?" she asked suspiciously. "That is a medical degree" I replied. "Oh no no" she laughed. "Remember I told you that I am illiterate!"

"I am very puzzled," I continued. "Why is that even though you are illiterate you know exactly what you need to do when a child has fever but when it comes to her schooling you don't do anything when she cannot read?" Now the blue sari mother was ready with her answer. "That is very simple" she explained. "We go to the doctor only sometimes when there is problem. He cannot come to my house to cook and feed and take care of my children. I have to do it. But the teacher is with my child every day. My job is to send my child to school and teacher-ji's job is to teach my child. I am doing my job and so she should do her job".

India's Parliament passed the Right to Education Act in 2009, thereby guaranteeing quality free and compulsory education to all children in the age group six to fourteen across the country. While most of the provisions of the Act are concerned with ensuring adequate inputs to schools, there are four key elements that have the potential to fundamentally transform the landscape of elementary education in India.

¹ Rukmini Banerji is Director, ASER Centre

First, in spirit the goal of the RTE Act is to ensure that every child (whether currently out of school or presently enrolled in school) has the opportunity to reach grade level competencies/educational levels appropriate to his or her age all the way up to age fourteen.

Second, continuous, comprehensive evaluation of children's progress through the elementary years means that teachers need to understand where the children are today, and plan for where to take them next based on that understanding.

Third, efforts have to be made to explain children's progress to parents.

Fourth, every school has to develop a School Development Plan with the help of the local School Management Committee. By design, many members of these committees will be parents.

Today, almost all of India's children are enrolled in school. The journey to ensure schooling for all has needed efforts from both sides - governments and communities. The credit goes to governments who provided schooling and to parents who send their children to school. The next journey must be that of ensuring learning for all. Taking parents along on this journey is critical, urgent and long overdue. ASER 2011 shows that 46% of mothers of children who are in school today have not been to school themselves. At a rough estimate, there are probably 100 million mothers who are like our blue sari mother in Rohtas. New methods and mechanisms need to be innovated on scale to allow mothers to meaningfully participate in discussions and actions related to how children's learning can be improved. Simple tools like those used in ASER are a good starting point. Without real participation of parents, especially mothers, the key objectives of RTE cannot be effectively translated from policy into practice.

