

The story of ASER has roots in experiences that began more than fifteen years ago in the slums of Mumbai. Pratham had just begun; we were young but we were ambitious. In 1996 we set ourselves a goal: by 2000 every child in Mumbai would be in school and learning. At first, our focus was on pre-schools. Why pre-schools? Because Mumbai did not have enough pre-schools, especially not in the large slums where most people were migrants. Families came to Mumbai in search of a better life, but the dislocation, the daily search for livelihoods - all this meant that families did not have the time and were not sure how to get their children ready for school. So we started community based "balwadis" – small pre-school centres run by local young women for the young children who lived in their neighbourhood. We felt that universal access to preschool would lead to universal enrolment in Std 1. This could be one way to ensure that every child was in school.

In 1996, we had 150 balwadis. But the demand for neighbourhood pre-schools was high, and the number grew quickly. Pratham offered very little money, but gave training and some basic materials. Very soon there were over 3,500 balwadis spread out across all of Mumbai's slums. Bubbling up from this vast network came other needs and queries from communities. "What about children of school age who are not in school? What about the children who are going to school but are not doing well?" Soon we began to work with two kinds of children – children who were "left out" and children who were "left behind". The "left out" children were visible; they could be seen working, taking care of their siblings and many were simply just playing around. But the "left behind" children were almost invisible. In very large numbers they were in school, often going to class every day. Although parents and others had a sense that many were not doing well, it was not clear what the "not doing well" meant.

In November 1996, we did a small study of arithmetic in some municipal schools in Andheri. The focus was on Std 3 and 4. Children came one by one. We asked them to name numbers and do basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The results were shocking – a large number of children could not do the basics. And this was in an area where almost all children were coming to school.<sup>1</sup>

By 1998-1999, there were Pratham volunteers in all municipal primary schools across Mumbai. Community volunteers or "balsakhis" worked to help academically weak children improve. Outside school, local youth collected out-of-school children in small groups in their community and taught them basic language and math skills to get them ready for school. The Pratham model of large scale collaboration with the government schools was held up as model and people from across the country came to see and understand this partnership. Some invited Pratham to come and work in their cities or their states. Soon there was activity in Vadodara, Patna, Lucknow, Jaipur, and Delhi – in government schools and in communities.

But as our work spread to other places, our frustration with what we were doing intensified. We worked hard, but the pace of progress was not fast enough for children to have a meaningful shot at completing elementary education. To get a ten year old girl who had never been to school "ready" for school meant that we had to get her up to speed to handle what was expected of her in Std 5. If a boy was in Std 4 but could not read, we had to get him not only reading but able to deal with text of varying difficulty, think critically and voice his own views. We needed to be able to do more with children and we needed to do it faster. The speed was necessary so that they could "catch up" with others in a meaningful way.

In 2002, all across Pratham we stopped doing what we were doing and each worked with a group of 20 to 25 children who could not read. These children were either enrolled in school in Std 3, 4 or 5 or they were not in school but at least eight years old. Our goal was to see how far we could bring these children in one month. Some worked with children in the community, others in school; there were different languages and different parts of the country. Even within Pratham we needed a common vocabulary and a common understanding to be able to share our learnings with each other.

A basic reading tool (which is now called the ASER reading tool) evolved during this time. It served several purposes. First, it clearly articulated the goal, which was to enable children to read a "story" fluently.<sup>2</sup> Next, we grouped the children by level for instruction and used appropriate activities and materials to work with the children from the level at which they were to bring them towards the goal. The simple tool helped us think

<sup>1</sup> The findings of the study were shared with the senior officials of the municipal corporation. Within weeks, in partnership with Pratham, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai had launched a city wide math improvement program called "Shatak Zhep".

<sup>2</sup> We noticed that fluency and comprehension were correlated. Fluency freed up resources to tackle text and construct meaning from what was read.

about these things. Before starting to teach, every child sat with the instructor and tried to read the four line paragraph.<sup>3</sup> If she could read the paragraph with ease then she attempted to read the “story”.<sup>4</sup> If she could not read the paragraph then she tried to tackle the simple everyday words. If the words were too difficult, then she

moved to letters. The reading levels were like a ladder, a child could move up or down and settle where she felt comfortable. Using a common vocabulary - “letter”, “word”, “para”, “story” we could communicate with each other and share learnings. The reading tool was very helpful in developing our instructional methodology. Assessment was the first step to thinking about the right action.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>कहानी</b></p> <p>बहुत दिनों से बारिश हो रही थी। गाँव में सभी जगह गंदा पानी भर गया था। सभी बारिश के रुकने की राह देख रहे थे। अचानक एक दिन बारिश रुक गई। सूरज निकल आया। सब लोग खुश हो गये। आसमान में चिड़ियाँ उड़ने लगीं। लोग अपने कपड़े सुखाने लगे। बच्चे भी घरों से बाहर निकलकर खेलने लगे।</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>अनुबंध</b></p> <p>मीना पढ़ने जाती है। राजू भी साथ जाता है। दोनों शाम को लौटकर आते हैं। घर आकर खाना खाते हैं।</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>द क च</b></p> <p>ब ल थ ह त म ख</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>हीरा कैसा</b></p> <p>शेर नानी भालू काम पीला फूल दिन मोर</p>

During this time we noticed that the reading tool could have other uses. For example, when classes were being conducted in the neighbourhood, parents or siblings would ask us what we were doing. We could point to the tool and show them the goal and we could point to somewhere else on the tool to indicate where their child was currently. Listening to children trying to read helped parents see what had to be done. Even if they were not literate themselves, the tool demystified many things for them. They began to understand what was expected of children in school. The tool helped

to carry parents along, as they saw and understood what was being attempted.

Our journey from assessment to action had begun.

I remember a summer morning in a village in Sultanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. We were making a village report card. Every household was asked if their children were enrolled in school. Every child in the village was asked to read a simple paragraph and do a simple subtraction problem. As was customary, we went to the pradhan to tell him what we were doing. The pradhan took a cursory look at us and said “ achcha ... survey hai? Kariye, kariye” (*Oh... it's a survey? Please go ahead*). Accustomed to numerous surveys, he was not even interested in finding out what the survey was about.

We moved systematically household by household, hamlet by hamlet, talking to parents, interacting with children. Questions like, “do your children go to school” got quick and sometimes disinterested answers. But asking children to read grabbed everyone’s attention. Children would flock around, wanting to try. Parents would stop working and come to observe. Children who were playing in the fields put on shirts before coming to read. Mothers and fathers called their children back from wherever they were in the village to be “tested”. In hamlet after hamlet, the exercise was suddenly transformed from a “survey” collecting data for someone else into an information gathering exercise that everyone wanted right now.

The curiosity was immense. What was striking was that many parents had no idea whether their children could read or do arithmetic. This was true of both illiterate and literate parents. Young people who were watching with the proceedings with interest were requested to help. Within minutes, the whole business turned into a hugely absorbing exercise with people participating in asking children to read or in discussing why children could or could not read. Finally, the hamlet results were declared. People waited for the “count”. “There are 40 households, 75 children. 70 children go to school but only 35 of those who go to school can read or do sums”. Even as results were being digested, there was intense discussion on how this was not okay and what could be done to improve things. Clearly the situation would not sort itself out. Urgent and rapid change was needed. In hamlet after hamlet, people agreed that schools must work, teachers must teach effectively but that parents or someone at home or in the neighbourhood too had to help. Only then would children’s learning begin to change.

<sup>3</sup> Another important learning was that the four short sentence format (now referred to as the “Level 1 (Std 1) text” in the ASER tool) was very helpful for beginning readers. After traversing the first sentence and understanding the context, many children propelled themselves forward using the context and the meaning that they extracted from the text.

<sup>4</sup> “Story” level in the ASER reading tool is a longer text equivalent in difficulty to what is contained in Std 2 textbooks.

Stepping back, and looking at the unfolding scene, you could very definitively say that information mattered. It mattered because it was about children community members knew and cared about. It mattered because the information generated was new: they had not known about children's learning or how to look at it in this simple way. It mattered because people had seen the information being generated before their own eyes. The simplicity of the tool and the method enabled people to participate. And it was easy to digest the results – for their own children and for all the children in the neighbourhood. Whether people were literate or illiterate, it was obvious to all that their own school going children should be able to do these basic tasks.

In a few days, the village report card was ready. We went back to the pradhan. Without looking up from what he was doing he asked me where he should sign. There was nowhere on the report card for a signature. Pradhanji thought this was very odd. He looked up at me and said, "Numbers have to be sent up and that needs me to sign." I tried to explain what the report card exercise had found. At the end of my explanation, he stated loudly, "The figures have to be wrong. How can it be that children are going to school and they cannot read?" The numbers and the explanation had upset him; the data went contrary to his assumptions.

Armed with the reading tool, Pradhanji walked into the village. Every child he met was asked to read. By the tenth child, Pradhanji sat down, put his head in his hands and said, "*yeh to mere izzat ka sawal hai.* (This is a question of my honour). How can this be the situation with children in my village and I not know about it?"

The entire exercise now known as ASER was based on experiences like the one in Sultanpur. For eight years, it has been a nationwide citizens' initiative to understand the status of children's schooling and learning in every rural district in the country. Using a common set of simple tools and a common sampling frame, in each district there is a local organization that conducts ASER and then disseminates its findings. Like the exercise of village report cards, ASER too is fundamentally based on participation and involvement of ordinary people. If we do not know, we cannot act. Only when we understand, can we think of what to do next. Waiting for the government alone to improve things will take a long time. Like Pradhanji and the parents in the village, it is essential that we get involved in measuring, then understanding, and then acting to improve the future of our children. This is how ASER was born.

