

CHAPTER 6 – ASER INDIA

Learning for all: the challenge of taking everyone along Examples from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) – India

By Rukmini Banerji

ASER INDIA OVERVIEW

In 1996, the Annual Status of Education Report evolved from the work of the NGO Pratham in developing basic reading tools to assess children's learning levels. ASER is now a nation wide, annual assessment of children's literacy and numeracy skills. Since 2005, the ASER survey has been collecting information with the aim of providing reliable data on enrollment and children's basic learning. Owing to its success, the model has been adopted in Pakistan by ASER Pakistan and in East Africa by Uwezo.

ASER takes the following three-pronged approach:

- Measure to understand
- Understand to communicate
- Communicate to change

Key data from the latest ASER in 2012 demonstrates that although ASER records 96 percent primary enrollment in India, around 60 percent of children cannot read properly and 45 percent cannot do basic arithmetic.



THE BLUE SARI MOTHER – ILLITERATE, DISEMPOWERED BUT KEY TO IMPROVING LEARNING FOR ALL

In a quiet corner of eastern India, in a village in Rohtas district in Bihar, a group of women were chatting in the mild sunshine of a late winter afternoon. You could see green rice fields stretching in all directions. The village primary school was also visible through the trees in the distance. School was over. Children had come home, abandoned their books and bags, and were now playing outside. As they talked, the women were cleaning rice. It was a good time for having a chat. (I was in the village, with some colleagues, to explore how mothers, especially those who were illiterate or not schooled, perceived the question of learning).

"How is the education in this school?" I asked. "I send my children to school," said one woman. "I even send my son and daughter to tutoring and buy them books." Several women joined the conversation. "How do you know if your child is learning?" I wanted to know. "How can we tell?" they asked. "We are not literate. But we send our children to school and we send them to tutoring also. So they must be learning."

I invited children to come sit on the edge of the women's circle and read. What I had were a few reading tasks – letters, words, simple paragraphs and a short 8-10 line story – all in big font, printed on white paper [see Hindi Reading Tool image]. The children were curious. They crowded around me, some looking over my shoulder, others leaning over each other. The text was basic; simple and familiar everyday words, sentences and contexts that children could relate to. All of it was easier than the lessons in the Grade II textbook. All the children tried to read; many could read the letters and some could read the words, but only a few managed to read the paragraph and the story.

The women watched. There was a woman in a blue sari. Her daughter was in Grade IV 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 task on hand. With some hesitation on her side and much encouragement from her daughter, the blue sari lady began to concentrate on the paper. Pointing to the letters, she said, "This one must be easy because many children could do it. That one (pointing to the story) is not easy because even bigger children could not do it."

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 good medicines. After another few days the fever does not go down then I will take her back to the same doctor and fight with him." "So you have a 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," she informed me.

"I am very puzzled," I continued. "Why is it 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?" The blue sari mother was ready with her answer. "That is very simple," she explained. "We go to the doctor only sometimes; only when there is problem. Not every day. It is not the doctor's job to come 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's job is to teach my child. I am doing my job and so she should do her job."



Blue sari mother. Photo: ASER India

This mother's story is not unusual. ASER aims to inform all parents, even those who feel they are unable to demand better learning outcomes for their children and equip them with the understanding and the information they need to meaningfully participate in thinking about how important learning is for their children and how their children's learning can be improved.

Today, almost all of India's children are enrolled in school. This journey to ensure schooling for all has needed massive efforts from both governments and communities. The credit goes to governments who provided schooling opportunities and access. And equal credit goes to parents who have been sending their children to school in ever-increasing numbers for the last decade or more. India has approximately 200 million children in the 6-14 age group. All figures show that more than 95 percent of children of this age group are enrolled in school.

While enrollment levels in India continue to be impressive, available data on basic learning shows worrying trends: according to the Annual Status of Education Report 2012, close to half of all children in Grade V will complete the primary stage of schooling without being able to fluently read text at Grade II level. The situation in arithmetic is even more alarming. For example, it is expected that children will be able to do subtraction of two digit numbers with borrowing by the end of Grade II, but according to ASER estimates, in 2012 only about half of those in Grade V could do it. More alarming is the fact that this capability seems to be declining with each subsequent cohort that is moving through school.

Every year since 2005, ASER has carried out a citizen led effort to understand the status of children's schooling and basic learning. In every district in India there is a local organization that conducts ASER, using a common set of simple tools and a common sampling frame, and then disseminates its findings. More than 25,000 volunteers working with over 500 local institutions and organizations across the country were involved in ASER 2012. Together they reached 16,000 villages, over 300,000 households and well over 600,000 children. The ASER findings at national, state, and district levels have helped to put the issue of children's learning squarely at the center of the educational debates and discussions in India. Inspired by ASER, other countries like Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali, and Senegal have all started citizen led assessments of their own.

Non-governmental organizations like Pratham, and others, are using ASER's findings to push learning to centerstage in education discussions in India, and to compel government and parents to think about what needs to be done to improve learning. This wide-ranging transformation, policies and practices, assumptions and activities need to respond to the problems not just at the top but also in the middle and at the bottom. The next challenge that India needs to undertake has to be the journey of ensuring learning for all. Taking parents along on this journey is critical, urgent and long overdue. ASER 2012 shows that approximately half of the mothers of children who are in school today have not been to school themselves. Roughly estimated, there are probably 100 million mothers who are like our blue sari mother in Bihar. To enable such mothers to participate, new methods and mechanisms have to be innovated on a large scale to allow mothers to enable them to play a meaningfully role in discussions of and actions related to how children's learning can be improved. Simple tools like those used in ASER are a good starting point. They help ordinary people understand where children are today and enable them to think about where they need to be tomorrow. These initiatives build our capacity as people, whether in the government or in the family, to think about what we want and how to get there. They are building blocks in the process of understanding what works and what does not.

For example, using some of the lessons learned from ASER, Pratham worked in 500 villages in rural Rajasthan and Bihar – areas with very low levels of literacy among women.¹⁸ The aim was to understand what kinds of activities done with mothers lead to the improvement of their children's learning.¹⁹ During the course of this work we found that mothers (like the mother in the blue sari) can support their children's learning through a variety of methods like doing activities together, looking at their children's notebook, "reading" picture books/cards, and going to the school together to ask teachers what they can do to help at home. But all of this needs two important steps – first, to understand the status of children's learning and second, to be persuaded that being illiterate is not necessarily a disqualification for helping children learn. Once these barriers are removed, even mothers with no education can begin to participate.