

# The Bottom-Up Push for Quality Education in India

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As in other parts of the world, there has been resistance to the assessment of learning outcomes in India. The old habit of creating provision-driven policy makes it comfortable for governments to hold themselves accountable for inputs rather than outcomes. Changing this habit is an uphill battle that has to be fought at every level, from villages to the national capital. This chapter offers an emerging model from India: an annual nationwide effort that aims to engage students, faculty, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), women's groups, training and educational institutes, the government, and policymakers in understanding children's learning levels, using assessment for action as well as for accountability.

## Development of the Annual Status of Education Report

In 2004, then newly elected government of India levied an education tax in order to substantially improve the funding of elementary education and declared that it would emphasize outcomes over outlays. However, there was no move on behalf of the government to publicly report on the effects of this additional education spending. Even the routine education data reported by the government were 4 to 5 years old in a country that was rapidly changing. Thus, Pratham, a large-scale nongovernmental educational organization, launched in 2005 a volunteer-based movement to conduct a national household survey.

The annual survey, called the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), was designed to measure changes in student enrollment and learning levels. Each ASER is the result of collaboration among hundreds of NGOs, educational institutions, and volunteer groups—who reached out to nearly

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320,000 households in 16,000 villages in order to assess and interview more than 700,000 children and parents. Every September and October, surveyors conduct fieldwork—the ASER is published and widely disseminated in early January of the following year. The cost of the entire exercise in 2011 was under \$1 million; it was funded by individual and corporate donations (including Google and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation). The ASER idea has been transplanted and adapted for use in nations in East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania), Pakistan, Mali, and Senegal.

### **The Impact of the Education Report**

The first significant impact of ASER was the shortening of the lag time for data reporting: from nearly 5 years down to a single year. Until ASER came around, although it was common to talk about the poor quality of education in India, educational quality was never quantified. ASER brought to light two important facts in 2005 (Pratham, 2011). First, 92.4% of children in rural India were enrolled in school, and in almost half the country this number exceeded 95%. Second, nearly 48% of children in grade 5 could not read at a grade 2 level, and nearly 58% could not solve a simple division problem. Some states were worse than others, but a lack of basic skills was widespread.

The conclusion to be drawn from these data should have been simple for policymakers: A focus on basic reading and math outcomes was needed. But the reaction from the education establishment was to oppose the ASER assessment as minimalistic, to reject external assessments of any kind, and instead to propagate ideas of holistic learning that were not embedded in any measurable outcomes and were difficult to implement in the current Indian context.

Some states made attempts to improve the quality of education intermittently after 2005, but only a few focused on learning outcomes in reading and mathematics. At the national level, the government's focus on inputs continued with the passage of the Right to Education Act. As a result, subsequent ASER reports showed that, while the enrollment figures had improved to 97% by 2011, school attendance remained at around 70–75% (Pratham, 2011). And the estimates of basic learning in many states showed a declining trend.

### **Reality Check: India's PISA Performance**

The lack of urgency or desire for change by the government was in stark contrast to the rapid changes in the country due to India's growing economy. Industries and businesses that were expanding complained that the youth who came to them for entry-level jobs, whether to serve at business counters, in hotels, or as engineers, did not possess basic skills. Change was needed. In



2009–2010, India entered the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses children 15 years of age and older who are still in school. In India, this meant that about 60% of children were not a part of this survey, since they entered grade 1 but dropped out before age 15. Thus, it is no surprise that out of the 74 PISA participants, the two Indian states were ranked 72 and 73 respectively, higher only than Kyrgyzstan (OECD, 2009). The nodal scores of Indian participants for reading and mathematics literacy were the lowest on the PISA scale.

This is not surprising given the ASER data of the last 7 years. ASER was a simple assessment of whether a child could read a grade 1 or grade 2 level text, simple words or alphabets, or nothing at all. This simplicity allowed less-educated volunteers to assess with ease. Also, the results were so transparent that even illiterate parents could understand what they meant. Given this dismal student performance, how can an education system be built that focused on learning outcomes?

### **Learning to Read at Scale**

It is often said that information leads to action. We do not find this to be true. Although information is a starting point for action, action itself must be engineered at all levels, especially when it concerns a disempowered population. A randomized evaluation conducted in Uttar Pradesh clearly highlighted the fact that merely informing parents and members of the community about children's learning levels, including testing children in front of them, led to no major changes in practice. However, when community volunteers are trained in "learning to read," children's learning levels improve (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glennerster, & Khemani, 2010). What is true of parents and village community members is true of policymakers, too. It is not enough to point out the problem. "What works" has to be demonstrated visibly at scale.

Pratham's Read India program, now instituted in nearly 25,000 villages, is attempting to improve the basic reading and arithmetic abilities of children in collaboration with village governments, village volunteers, and school teachers. This program was developed based on past experiences and evidence from randomized evaluations (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, & Walton, 2010). In each village, learning camps with a cycle of 7 to 10 days, 3 to 4 hours per day, are held every 2 to 3 months. The key elements of the Pratham "learning camps" include finding out the level of each child, grouping children on the same level together for instructional purposes, using appropriate teaching-learning methods and materials, and tracking the progress of each child.

There is a great deal of diversity across Indian classrooms in what children know and can do. The fact that a majority of children cannot cope with their grade-level curriculum means that teachers find it difficult to teach effectively. The key elements of Pratham's learning camps help remove some of these constraints. This short but outcome-focused, activity-based teaching-learning program takes children visibly from one level to the next. It modifies the role of information from merely starting a blame game to one that actually leads to immediate action and change. The idea is to generate a buzz that can help catalyze larger positive public opinion toward change and give high-level policymakers a chance to make a difference.

### Focus on Learning Outcomes

As a result of clear goal-setting at the top and focused action on the ground, over the last decade there were impressive strides made in access and enrollment. This occurred because access to schools was equated with providing education. Measurable outcomes as indicators of good education had to enter this equation. Clear goal-setting and an alignment of policies with focused action inside classrooms was needed to go beyond universal schooling toward learning for all.

The isolation of schools from communities has to end. The language of "community participation" in education needs to be changed to "community initiative" for education. The stronger and more widespread this initiative, the more persuasive will be the pressure from below to build the capabilities of children and their ability to learn.

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