

CHALLENGES OF ASER IN THE NORTH EAST

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In 2005 when we arrived in Guwahati, we knew the exercise to conduct ASER in all the seven states of North East India was going to be a challenging one! We anticipated some of the problems: working around the difficult topography, making contacts and negotiating the different political situations of the region.

We landed in Guwahati with a mixture of people from the North East and other parts of the country. Ashok, originally from Manipur, was then based in Pratham in Gujarat and reluctant to travel, but relented when he was promised that this would be a one-time assignment. Parismita, an English Literature student who was working in Pratham Delhi, spoke Assamese and so had no choice but to lead the team. Shruti, with the Pratham UP programme, spoke Bangla and proved to be very helpful in parts of Assam and Tripura; and Shobhini, who did not speak any of the local languages but made up for it by sheer tenacity. What unfolded over the next few months and the subsequent years that we have been in the North East has been exhilarating, energizing and exasperating, not necessarily in the same measure.

In 2005, we were just a few people and had 75 districts to know and to reach. We found ourselves a place as base camp and began our operations out of suitcases. The first few days went in understanding the best way to travel to the six other states that we were to cover, understanding how system functioned, working around the incessant 'bandhs' and road blocks. We began to figure out how to print materials, make transport arrangements and where to start contacting organizations and institutions.

From Guwahati, we broke up into smaller groups and went in different directions. The immediate concern was to find local partners in each district of every state, who like us would believe in citizen participation in understanding outcomes and would be willing to volunteer time to visit twenty villages in their own district. We met local colleges and universities, local NGOs, clubs, church groups, etc. We noticed that the students' unions were particularly strong in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and could also be of use. According to the 2001 Census, Arunachal has 13 districts, some of which have neither NGOs nor colleges; so eventually in these remote border districts we partnered with NSS¹ students from high schools. Our biggest learning was that there were energetic and enthusiastic youngsters everywhere, who not only guided us in finding suitable partners but have actively contributed to our efforts in the North East thus far.

In 2005, the first year of ASER, we made repeated trips to all the North Eastern states barring Mizoram and were unable to find enough partners to survey all the districts. So we ended up surveying only 19 districts out of the total of 71. For example at least half a dozen visits had to be made to Itanagar alone to find suitable partners. These frequent trips, though unproductive in the early years, enabled us to build relationships and establish contacts with groups who were to help us with the survey in the following years. One such case happened by chance while photocopying in a busy market of Itanagar! The shop owner was more interested in understanding the content of the documents than in photocopying them. One thing led to another and the shop owner told us that he knew a local NGO working in education. That's how we got the district partner for Papumpare² in 2005.

Some districts were quite remote. For example, two entire days went in travelling to the town of Koloriang (according to the 2001 Census Koloriang is in Lower Subansiri district, otherwise it's in the newly formed district of Kurung Kumey of Arunachal Pradesh), a very picturesque location. But the steep and winding roads took a heavy toll on us; we had frequent stops to run behind the bus or the Sumo and into the bushes by the side of the road to deal with travel sickness.

We also found that travelling in remote areas comes with its own share of difficulties. In 2005, when we wanted to do ASER in Dhalai, a remote, insurgency prone and tribal district in Tripura, the district partner (a journalist) withdrew support after looking at the list of the sampled villages, as he thought that it would be impossible to go and survey in some of them! But we found an enthusiastic group of young dancers to help us. One of the sampled villages was said to be 'unsafe', the locals strongly advised us not to go there. But we didn't want to skip this village so we approached the police for help. We divided ourselves into 4 groups and headed to the village. When we reached it, we realized that none of us knew the local language. The police eventually left their weapons in the jeep and became enthusiastic ASER volunteers!

The lack of travel infrastructure is an impediment in reaching many villages, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland; it took us two to three days of walking to reach many of the sampled villages. If the selected village is in the interior then the only option is to walk: no matter how rich you are, no matter how many vehicles you have, you are as poor as anyone else on the road. In Manipur a common problem faced every year is that some of the sampled villages are easier to reach by crossing the

¹ The National Service Scheme (NSS), run out of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, extends to all states and universities in India and covers +2 level also in many states. The cardinal principle of the programme is that "it is organised by the students themselves and both students and teachers through their combined participation in social service, get a sense of involvement in the tasks of national development. Besides, the students, particularly, obtain work experience which might help them to find avenues of self-employment or employment in any organisation at the end of their university career." (<http://nss.nic.in/intro.asp>)

² Papumpare district is the capital district of Arunachal Pradesh

international border with Myanmar! But Myanmar prohibits any printed document (particularly in English) being carried into their country, even in transit. ASER volunteers found innovative ways to carry the ASER survey tools through Myanmar, such as hiding the survey materials inside their clothing to pass through the border.

In the ASER survey, testing of children is usually done over a weekend in most parts of the country, because this is when they are more likely to be found at home. But Sunday being the day of Sabbath in a number of North Eastern states, most children are in church or visiting relatives in neighbouring villages. We therefore conduct the test early in the morning or late afternoon, which invariably means that the surveyors have to spend a night in the village. Being in the east the days in these parts are also really short, but the sunrise is earlier than other parts of the country, so this partially compensates for the loss of working hours.

The last six years in the North East have been a great learning experience for all of us. We learnt to be persistent and patient; the extensive travel enriched our knowledge of the diverse local cultures of the area. We are among the lucky few who got the opportunity to learn by doing. We hope that we will continue this learning for years to come and be able to share the same with all of you!

