

ASER 2014 – Looking back

Amit Kaushik¹

Ten years ago, an ambitious and audacious idea was floated – why not have a people’s audit of government expenditure on education and produce a report for the common man? In a conversation shortly after the 2% Education Cess was introduced in 2004, I recall Madhav (Chavan, co-founder and CEO of Pratham) first proposing the concept, arguing that the people had a right to know where the Cess was being spent, and how effective it really was. At the time, I was with the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and grappling with the concept of the *Prarambhik Shiksha Kosh* (PSK), a non-lapsable fund we were trying to convince the Finance Ministry to create, in order to ensure that Cess revenues remained with MHRD to support elementary education. In that context, Madhav’s idea seemed like a good one, but I had no inkling then of the scale at which he was proposing to execute it.

When it was finally carried out, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2005 covered some 490 districts and 3.3 lakh children, who were tested by volunteers from all walks of life, at home, in school, on the streets and in the fields, and just about everywhere in between. Today the scale and scope of the reports have widened significantly, but for a first time exercise, it was bold and unparalleled in scale; quite simply, nobody had ever attempted anything like it before. Most striking of all was its intent, captured by the “Preamble” to the report. *“We, people of India, from different states and regions, speaking different languages, sat with our children and looked within, inside our homes, at our villages, into our schools, and prepared this report for ourselves, to build a better India”*.² This was what set ASER apart from donor-funded or government surveys - it was a report of the people, by the people, for the people.

In 2004, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), the government’s programme for universalising elementary education, was in its third year of implementation. Our concerns in MHRD at the time were primarily around provisioning and ensuring that all children were enrolled in school, in order to meet the first goal of the programme, viz., all children in school/EGS centre/bridge course by 2003. It was already evident that the 2003 enrolment milestone had not been met, and all our efforts were thus concentrated on catching up. When the findings of ASER 2005 were shared with us, some days before the formal release of the report, it was heartening to learn that the survey had estimated that just over 93% children of the appropriate age group were enrolled in school; this accorded well with the data being reported by the states, and seemed to indicate that SSA was having a successful impact on the ground.

The focus of most of the debate after ASER 2005 was more on the national enrolment figures; learning levels had also been tested, and the results did not fully match either popular perception, or the available NCERT data. Later reports, treating the question of enrolment as more or less settled, have emphasised learning levels of children, testing among other things, to see where they stand, and exploring the differences, if any, between public and private schools. These reports have also examined the availability of facilities in schools vis-à-vis those mandated by the Right to Education Act, and collected some basic economic information about households, such as possession of mobiles and TVs, etc.

The numbers coming out of the ASER 2005 survey also validated the results of another study commissioned by government and carried out by IMRB.³ The latter study estimated that some 1.34 crore or 6.94% children were then out of school, which approximated the ASER estimates of 1.4 crore or 6.6%. The importance of the ASER results lay of course, in the fact that unlike the IMRB exercise which had been funded by government, they were an independent and non-partisan estimation. While the IMRB report could conceivably be questioned as a “government statistic”, the results of ASER were not so easily open to multiple interpretations. Both the IMRB report and ASER 2005 were used extensively by government to provide evidence of the impact and effectiveness of its universalisation programme, at least in terms of improved enrolment figures.

While the enrolment data emerging from ASER has generally been viewed as encouraging, this has not always been the case with figures related to learning. NCERT and several state governments disputed many of the findings, questioning both the methodology and the process adopted to determine learning outcomes. In some cases, the hostility extended to actively banning Pratham from working with their schools, a challenge the latter overcame by working directly with village communities instead.

¹ Practice Head, Education & Skills Development, IPE Global Pvt Ltd.

² Pratham Resource Centre, Mumbai, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2005 – Rural, 2006.

³ <http://bit.ly/1xCn3RO> accessed 31.12.2014

Somewhere around the fifth ASER report, a suggestion was made that perhaps there should be fewer reports; possibly one report every 2-3 years instead of a regular annual publication. Many others who work in this sector no doubt shared my relief that this was one suggestion Pratham did not accept. An annual ASER exercise and report have now become an integral part of the education landscape, serving to educate and inform stakeholders in the system and the public at large.

What impact has ASER had on the Indian education environment? First, just the introduction of the concept of a “people’s audit of education” was a game changer in itself; the People’s Report on Basic Education (PROBE) was a one-off exercise and had not, at the time, been repeated, nor was it anything like ASER in its scope. ASER reports have regularly held up a mirror to society, informing us of how much (or how little) our children have gained in terms of improved education levels, access to better schooling, and removal of inequities. Note that its original purpose has not changed - ASER is still aimed at anyone who has an interest in education, not just policy makers or academics or other standard stakeholders in the system.

Second, the single most significant finding of ASER year after year has been the fact that learning levels across the country, whether in public or private school, have not improved. Clearly, even after spending crores of rupees on delivering a Right to Education, our efforts have not succeeded as well as they should have; the policy prescription for shifting attention away from inputs to outcomes could not be clearer.

Third, and directly as a result of the above finding, ASER has succeeded in bringing the issue of learning centrestage; from a focus on ensuring that children are enrolled in school and that adequate infrastructural and teaching facilities are provided to them, the debate has now moved to a place where inputs are assumed, but the interest is in outcomes. For the first time, the 12th Five Year Plan acknowledged that “there is a need for a clear shift in strategy from a focus on inputs and increasing access and enrolment to teaching learning process and its improvement in order to ensure adequate appropriate learning outcomes”,⁴ explicitly agreeing that a more-of-the-same approach focused only on provisioning will not necessarily work. While there will always be discussion around methodological approaches and whether ASER follows this or that method as opposed to others, the fact is that successive ASER reports have compelled us all to sit up and take notice of what is really happening inside schools.

Additionally, ASER has pushed both the central and state governments into commissioning their own assessments and analyses of the status of education in their schools, often in a move to defend policy and/or practice. In many cases, these assessments do not produce the same results as ASER, partly since they are not comparable in terms of what is measured and who is covered, and there is often much controversy and hand wringing over the discrepancies. Yet it is a moot point if such assessments would today be considered so essential if public perception had not been influenced so profoundly by ASER.

Fourth, ASER has been successful in highlighting an important trend in school enrolment - from only 16% children enrolled in private schools when ASER 2005 was carried out, the percentage has increased to nearly 30% in the last report. Present trends seem to indicate that this number will increase to 50% by the end of the current decade. Given that this increase has taken place in *rural* areas, where much of the money spent on SSA and other programmes has been concentrated, this is not an encouraging development, and is one that merits serious reflection on the part of policy makers.

What should one now expect after a decade of this exercise? Ideally, the annual reports should continue to raise the uncomfortable questions that they do today. Perhaps there is now a case for a somewhat more sophisticated analysis of learning; not necessarily one that substitutes for say, a PISA or TIMSS, but one that develops a more rigorous indigenous model of assessment, feeding even more closely into policy making and thus potentially making a difference to learning in schools. For there is no doubt that unless we get this piece right, any illusions of benefiting from a “demographic dividend” in the future are unlikely to be realised.

Personally, I would also like to see greater dissemination of the results of the report, not just at the time of its release, but continuously through the year. Pratham and ASER Centre have of course, been disseminating the results at district and State levels all these years, but what we need in this country is a continuous and sustained debate about the education of our children. Data from ASER is used regularly by the media to illustrate their reports; perhaps the next question to ask could be around ways to deepen this engagement in order to keep a discussion going.

Whatever direction the report takes in the coming years, ASER can rightly claim the credit for having changed, over the course of the last decade, the manner in which school education is discussed and understood in India; for that one achievement alone, Pratham deserves our thanks.

⁴ Planning Commission, Government of India, Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) – Faster, More Inclusive and Sustainable Growth, Vol III, 2012.