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Every year, the first few pages of the ASER report acknowledge those who "reached the remotest corners of India" - the hundreds of organizations and institutions that partner with ASER to make the survey possible on the scale and at the speed at which it is conducted. This year, as every year, many different kinds of organizations were ASER partners. These ranged from self help groups to universities; from non government organizations to teacher training colleges.

It is the 25,000 or so people from these partner organizations who actually reach each sampled village - 17,473 such villages in ASER 2016. They are trained for three days, tested on their understanding and ability to conduct the survey, and then sent in pairs to sampled villages. Before embarking on the survey, they take a pledge to conduct the survey "with utmost sincerity".²

Who are these people? Although we acknowledge our partner organizations by name, we are not able to do the same for our volunteers - doing so would add significantly to the time and cost of producing the ASER report, and make an already thick publication unmanageably bulky. Given the short time frame between data collection and report release, at the time that the report goes to print we don't even know exactly how many volunteers participated in all. But here are some things we do know about those who volunteered to conduct this 11th edition of ASER.³

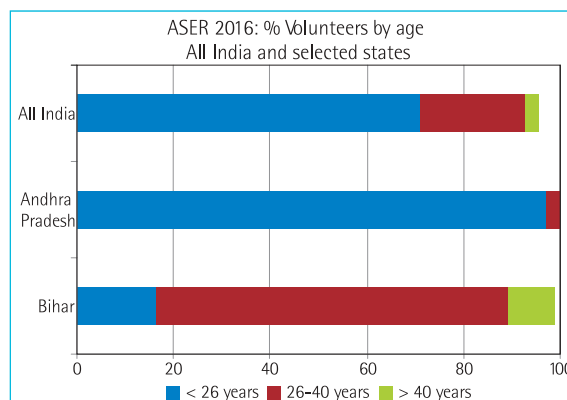
They're mostly young.

Overall, more than 7 out of every 10 volunteers for ASER 2016 are 25 years old or younger.

No surprises here - around the world it is mostly young people who believe that change is possible. Pratham's work over the last twenty years is an ongoing demonstration of the fact that given the opportunity, youth in India are more than willing to volunteer their time to contribute when they believe the cause is important and they feel they can make a difference. In Pratham programs, young people volunteer a few hours to teach children over a period of several months, while for ASER volunteers a shorter but more intensive stint is required.

Remarkably, more than 700 ASER 2016 volunteers were under 18 - still legally minors, but already participating in an important national effort. Anecdotal evidence suggests that "doing ASER" is an experience that often changes people's perceptions and understanding of the contexts they live in and thought they knew well. How important, then, to offer experiences like these to young people - opportunities to construct a concrete understanding of real issues facing their own communities, at a time when they have many years ahead to help resolve these issues if they so choose.⁴

In 2016 our youngest volunteers were spread across many states, but the largest numbers were in two states - Andhra Pradesh and Haryana. In both these states ASER partnered with the District Institutes for Education and Training (DIETs) to conduct the survey. DIETs are government teacher training colleges, and DIETs in Andhra Pradesh are among our oldest partners - having conducted ASER every year since 2007, or nine times in a row. DIETs participated in ASER in several other states too - 169 DIETs in all this year. In Bihar, DIET students were in-service, rather than pre-service teachers, resulting in a significantly older age profile; but in all other case these were young people who are in the process of becoming teachers.



¹ Director of Research, ASER Centre

² The ASER pledge is taken each year by all ASER staff, all Master Trainers and all volunteers. See the full ASER 2016 pledge at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3znMFpxiXbk>

³ Because the first priority for data entry is to enter survey data as quickly as possible, information on the people responsible for collecting it is still being entered at the time of going to press. The characteristics discussed here are based on self-reported information from about 20,000 volunteers for whom data entry is complete. They are located in 540 districts, or 92% of the total of 589 districts that were surveyed in ASER 2016.

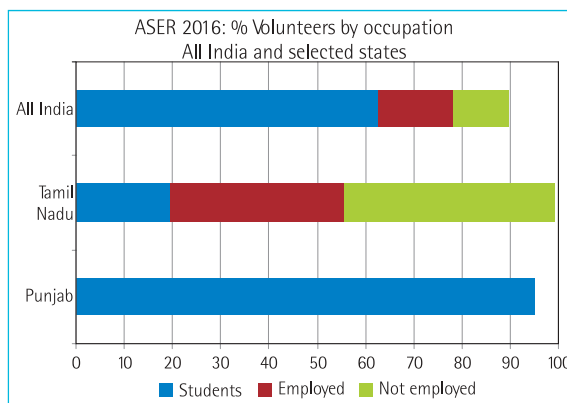
⁴ Taking this idea forward, since last year ASER Centre has been working with the Government of Punjab to implement a module on water and sanitation in government upper primary schools in the state. The module aims to help children understand major issues related to water and sanitation in their communities, in their homes and their schools, and integrates activities to collect and analyze data from their own localities with a range of other activities intended to deepen their understanding of the issues involved.

If the ASER experience is an eye opener for volunteers in general, it is perhaps even more important for future teachers. ASER provides insights into aspects of children's learning needs that are different from what is usually available in teacher training programs. Can making these young people aware of just how far most children are from grade level, help to change the way they will teach in the future? We don't yet have an answer, but observing the fact that there is a problem is surely the first step towards a solution.⁵

They're mostly students.

In addition to the DIETs, increasing numbers of universities and colleges have also opted to partner with ASER over the years: teacher training colleges, colleges and departments of social work, and others. Overall, in ASER 2016 well over half of our partners nationwide were institutions of higher education of one kind or another.

ASER volunteers' occupational profile reflects these affiliations. Across the country, 63% of all volunteers were students. In many states all ASER partners were DIETs, colleges or universities, and in these states - such as Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Sikkim and Telangana - well over 90% of volunteers were students. On the other hand, in states such as Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, where most ASER partners were NGOs, there were fewer students and the proportion of volunteers who were employed was substantially higher.

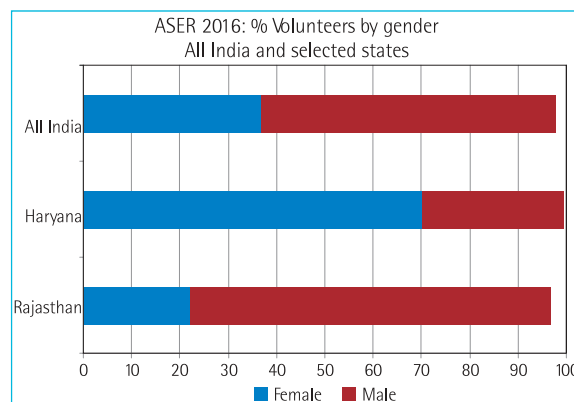


As these numbers indicate, institutions of higher education in rural India are often happy to partner with ASER and to explore other avenues to expand the range of opportunities they can make available to their students. Over the past few years ASER Centre has been able to partner with some of them to offer longer, deeper "capacity building" modules to their students, similar to those conducted in the DIETs, with similarly positive feedback.

Almost 40% are women.

ASER survey teams are required to travel to villages across India, sometimes fairly remote and difficult to access, and knock on the doors of complete strangers in order to collect data for ASER. Given the real or perceived limitations on women's mobility in India, one might imagine that few women would volunteer to participate in this kind of exercise. But the ASER volunteer profile shows that women do in fact participate in large numbers. Across India, almost 4 out of every 10 volunteers for ASER 2016 were women - close to 10,000 women in all.

In Haryana, for example, between September and November of 2016 almost 700 young women (and also about 300 young men) traveled the length and breadth of the state, visiting households and testing children. This is not the kind of image that normally comes to mind when thinking about Haryana, a state perhaps better known for having the most adverse sex ratio in the country. But in neighbouring Rajasthan, just 2 out of every 10 volunteers were women.



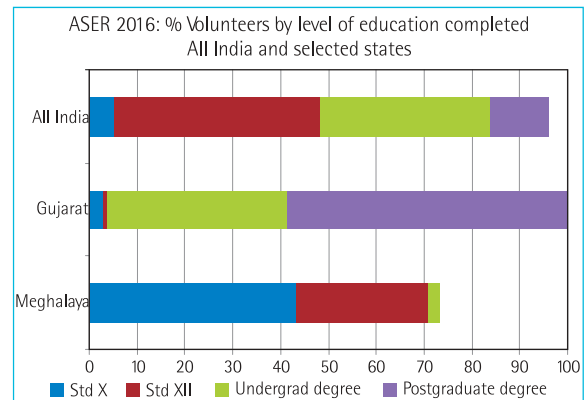
⁵ Given interest from many DIETs in constructing longer and deeper such experiences for their students, starting in 2015 Pratham and ASER Centre have partnered with about 50 DIETs to implement a series of modules aiming to explore the gaps between policy objectives and ground realities in education. Each module focuses on a different aspect of the elementary education domain and includes both classroom sessions and structured field exercises to collect data. In many DIETs students were taught how to use Pratham's CAMaL approach to identify children's current learning levels, group them by level, and teach using methods and materials appropriate for each level. They subsequently implemented this methodology in nearby schools as part of their practice teaching. This collaboration is currently in its second year; trained students will be tracked to understand what impact the training has on their teaching.

Nationwide, women's participation is driven largely, though not exclusively, by the participation of large numbers of colleges, especially teacher training institutions and departments of social work, many of which enroll a majority of female students. In Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, and Sikkim, more than 7 out of every 10 volunteers were women. A very different example is that of Kerala, where the survey was done almost entirely by women, who comprised 92% of all volunteers in the state - thanks to a state-wide partnership with Kudumbashree, the government of Kerala's women-based, community oriented initiative to eradicate poverty.

They've completed Grade 12 or an undergraduate degree.

Overall, more than 9 out of every 10 volunteers for ASER 2016 had completed grade 12 or higher - making them a far more highly educated set of individuals than the average Indian.⁶

The largest single group of volunteers had completed Grade 12 - nearly half of all volunteers for ASER 2016. More than a third had an undergraduate degree. Volunteers' educational profile varied across the country, however, and tended to be lower in some states in the northeast of India. In Meghalaya, Nagaland and Sikkim, for example, significant proportions of volunteers listed grade 10 as their highest educational level. At the other extreme is Gujarat, where the participation of a large number of university departments of social work meant that close to 60% volunteers had completed a postgraduate degree.



Over 11 editions of ASER, an estimated 2.5 lacs of people - a quarter of a million - have volunteered to participate in ASER.

As this brief description indicates, they are mostly young and educated. Because they are affiliated with district partner organizations, most are familiar with rural contexts and willing to engage with the issues their communities face - not from a safe distance, but from up close. Although the majority participated for the first time in 2016, about 1 in every 10 has participated in ASER at least once before.

Year after year, ASER findings show that the challenges facing our education system are enormous. But its operational model shows that as a country we already have the most important resource needed to resolve these challenges: people who are willing to help.⁷ Finding ways to include them, rather than exclude them from the process of finding and implementing solutions is key to moving forward as a country, in education and in other sectors.

⁶ The Human Development Index for 2014 estimates that Indians have on average completed 5.4 years of schooling.

⁷ A striking example of this is Pratham's 'Lakhon mein Ek' campaign of 2015, during which more than 300,000 local volunteers were found in about 150,000 rural and urban communities across India in a period of under 3 months. They assessed the status of schooling and learning in their own communities, made community report cards, and discussed what needed to be done to improve children's learning. In about 25,000 of these communities, this was followed by a "Reading week" where Pratham staff demonstrated simple activities that could be done by children, parents, and neighbours to build children's foundational skills in reading and arithmetic.