

ASER: The idea

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The picture on the opposite page is a snapshot of a scene on a particular day in November '05.

ASER2005 is a collective snapshot taken by about twenty thousand volunteers between November 14 and December 20, 2005. It represents reality at that point but we sense that the reality is changing. We intend to participate in that change, accelerate it, and shape it, because we believe that as citizens, it is our self-evident right and responsibility to do so. ASER is a declaration of this right and the responsibility that goes with it.

The picture on the facing page could raise many questions. Why is the boy carrying the burden? Why is the volunteer testing him with his burden on his head? Why on the road? What are the school-boy's thoughts? Why did the photographer take a picture of a boy?

ASER2005 looks at some simple basic indicators. Our report will lead to many questions too. But some facts will stand clear like the burden on the boy's head, and the schoolbag on the other boy's back.

This Report consists mainly of tables, charts, and graphs in addition to a few notes on the methodology. There is very little textual analysis and commentary. This is because first of all, the facts speak for themselves. Secondly, we had set ourselves a deadline of publication before the Republic Day of 2006, which did not leave much time for detailed analysis. Following this Report, we intend to launch a periodical called "ASER Discussions" to further analyze the data and to improve the subsequent ASERs.

The young people of ASER experienced a oneness of India in its villages that we could not capture in this report. Young women from Delhi went to remote areas of the Hilly North and the Northeast, the plains of Haryana, Punjab, and UP. Everywhere they were greeted with great warmth in every home. Other men and women from the East, West and South ventured into 'dangerous' territories where there is no evidence of government. Social networks came alive in many places where neither NGOs nor college contacts were readily available. Volunteers were greeted in every village, every school, and every home warmly. The act of testing brought many people together. Children wanted to be tested. Mothers wanted children tested. "Can my child read?"

The idea behind ASER is not just to take a snapshot for display or to merely make a statement. It is more than that. This is our country, these are our children, and the snapshot is to inform ourselves, the people of India, so that we understand the situation first hand and act to change the picture. The ASER results will be taken back to the districts and villages so that people can think about what to do next. We will extend a helping hand to the various levels of government to change the situation.

The issues of development of a modern democracy are linked with every problem of India one can think of. Education is no exception. Evidence-based discussions should be an important component in the development of democracy. In the absence of clear, consistent, and credible data such discussions are impossible. Recently governments have started commissioning independent third party evaluations and assessments. In that case, is ASER needed? If ASER was a small research agency, it would be redundant. But as a movement that takes scientific methods of assessment and analysis to large numbers of ordinary people and demystifies them, ASER has its own place.

On October 2, 2005, when the first email about ASER went out to five people in Pratham, we sort of knew we could do it. But, having reached and touched 84% of rural India at a breakneck speed, I can say on behalf of every person who became a part of ASER that we are proud of the effort and the result.