

A reversal of roles

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Someone very supportive of ASER remarked recently that the mobilization of over 20,000 volunteers across the country - in every state, in 549 districts - is a great example of people's participation. Is it?

ASER is a people's initiative. It is independent of the government and of people who have powers of various kinds but it is not without power of its own. It is constructive and not interested in pointing fingers. It is the growing *Abhiyan* outside the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

ASER2006, the second milestone since this people's initiative began, records some simple facts. 1. The proportion of out of school children has not diminished. 2. Children are entering formal schooling one year too early. 3. Older children are in lower classes in large numbers. 4. Learning levels show some improvement but more needs to be done on a nationwide scale. 5. Mother's education is highly correlated with the child's and nearly half the mothers cannot read.

It is important to record here, that although the picture may not appear to have changed a whole lot in one year, there is a lot of governmental effort in many states and at the center to improve the situation, mainly on the part of the administrators at the top. So, what is missing?

Much can be written about the fundamental right that has fallen by the wayside, the need to provide funds, to improve monitoring, to build schools, to appoint and train teachers of this kind or that. There is nothing new to be said except, "Just do it!", like the younger generation says these days.

But, beyond all this, especially where improvement in the quality of education is concerned, focused and purposeful efforts are still missing. Where these efforts have been made, change is visible.

Among the states where purposeful efforts were made, Madhya Pradesh results are nothing short of unbelievable. This success underscores two important points. One is that the very teachers and officers who are maligned and blamed, can perform given the right focus, the responsibility, and leadership. Saying, "You can do it" is more effective than saying, "You better do it". Secondly, there is good progress when efforts in schools are supported at home by mothers, volunteers, and the panchayat. Giving them tools and activities to help the children learn daily is important. Just meetings are not effective. Finally, planned state-wide initiatives not broken up into small "innovative" programs are needed.

ASER is nothing if it does not lead to action. Three critical interventions arise out of ASER2006.

First, in states where large numbers of children do not recognize alphabets or numbers in Std 1 and 2, reading and arithmetic ability in later years is poor. Correcting this is easy as many states have shown this year. But it is important to add that children should be able to read simple texts and know numbers with place value by the end of Std 2.

Second, children who can read fluently can comprehend. A 'reading period' in every classroom and good graded reading material in each school library is all that is really needed to improve fluency in reading. Just provision of textbooks is not enough. Children need good reading material.

Third, mothers' education affects enrollment, learning, dropping out, and gender bias. Involving mothers, even if they are illiterate is important. In fact helping mothers learn with their children will go a long way in not only children's learning, but also preventing dropping out of school and removing gender bias. There is a need to integrate the listless adult literacy programs with improvement of quality in schools.

The Read India campaign being launched today is a constructive *satyagraha* to make an impact along the above three lines. It is a people's initiative that will work with skill, determination, openness, and humility so that the youth of India and the mothers of children can change the status of education in the villages with the help of teachers. It will appeal to various levels of governments to participate and ask for cooperation in a reversal of roles.

Education and democracy are interlinked. ASER and Read India are about enhancing both in action.