

# *Being under six years in rural India!*

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Three important sets of data and reports became available to the public in the last quarter of 2006. First came the state-wise fact-sheets from NFHS-3, then the NSS 61st round data and FOCUS report on the situation of children under six in India. All three converge to tell a simple story - mothers are frail and anaemic, 585 out of 1000 rural women are not literate, only 199 have studied up to primary and 113 up to middle school and as many as 500 out of 1000 households do not have a single literate adult female. Not only do close to one-third of new-born babies weigh less than 2.5 kg, their nutritional status worsens during the first two years. 46 per cent of children under six are undernourished, more than half of our children are not immunised fully, a fifth of the children suffer from frequent bouts of diarrhoea and almost one-tenth of our children never reach age five<sup>2</sup>!

Though much of this has been known for some time, we are not planning for the education and care of our children nor doing much by way of pre-school education as young children wander into primary school before they turn six! True, there are wide state-wise variations with some regions of the country performing badly on almost all fronts while others seem to be coping with greater ease. Yet it is difficult to deny that the nutrition, health, early childhood care and education of the under-six has failed to receive the attention it merits. Interestingly 2005 was also the year when Government of India decided to conclusively transfer all services for children below 6 years of age to the Department of Women and Child Development.

ASER 2006 enriches our information base on under-six children. The highlight of the survey is that as many as 46.6 per cent of five year olds are enrolled in primary schools, the situation varying widely between states. While only 6.2 and 5.4 per cent five-year-olds are in school in Goa and Maharashtra, the proportion goes up to 74.0 per cent in Orissa and 70.8 percent in Rajasthan! Only 68.6 percent of four-year olds and 59.9 percent of three-year-olds attend anganwadis / balwadis. As the National tables in this report show,<sup>3</sup> by the time children reach 6 years 90.3 per cent of them are enrolled in primary school. One implication is that the proportion of under-age children in class one is high resulting in a highly uneven group of children in class one; some of it spilling over into class 2. However, as we move from the educationally disadvantaged to the more advanced states the correspondence between age and class becomes much more balanced after classes 1 and 2.

Reinforcing one of the main highlights of FOCUS, ASER 2006 too underlines the need to sit up and plan for pre-school education. But why do so many five-year-olds enrol in primary school. Is it that the ICDS programme does little other than feed children (of course, some states are exceptions) and its pre-school component remains weak? Equally, given the growing demand for pre-school education, parents have little option but to enrol them in primary schools.

The other big story from ASER 2006 has to do with the relationship between the education of mothers and the children. While it is well-known that children of educated mothers get support at home - the information collected from mothers in the surveyed households helps us get a better understanding of this relationship. Many more children of mothers with no schooling are not enrolled or have dropped out and more importantly the gender gap in families where the mother never went to school is wider. Equally significant - even when mothers are not literate - intensive reading / learning support to children in the school helps narrow the gap between children with literate and non-literate mothers. A well-functioning school, regular teaching, availability of libraries and intensive / time-bound reading programmes make a big difference. Here is a big role for panchayats, local youth groups and other civil society organisations. Creating a learning environment through libraries, local education fairs / melas, learning to read programmes can turn the tide in favour of a learning school.

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<sup>2</sup> NFHS 3 Fact-sheets ([www.nfhsindia.org/factsheet.html](http://www.nfhsindia.org/factsheet.html)), Employment and underemployment - the situation among social groups in India 2003-04, GOI October 2006 and Focus On Children Under Six - abridged report December 2006.

<sup>3</sup> National pages in this report, see page 32.

To break the apathy that has enveloped institutions of education and learning, it is important to energise people and get them to start taking greater interest in the education of children. Even simple efforts like encouraging parents (mothers and fathers) to ask their children what they have learnt in school every day, whether they have any homework or tests and check on what they have done would be a great help.

Another puzzle that has emerged from ASER 2006 is to do with adult learning<sup>4</sup>. It is not surprising that the percentage of mothers who never went to school seems more-or-less to correspond with those who could not read level 1 text. Thus while there are some state-wise variations, it may be important to enquire about the status of the adult literacy programmes and also whether there is a literacy component in the self-help group movement in many parts of the country. While it is more likely that mothers who had at least completed primary level education continue to read and write, those who went to school for fewer years did not show the same degree of facility with reading. Again, this reinforces the well accepted axiom that at least five years of school is necessary for a person to retain and use the literacy and numeracy skills - especially if they live in an environment where they do not have access to reading material.

The above findings need to be read in conjunction with that of the 61st round of NSS which reveals that close to 50 per cent of households in rural areas have no literate female and 26 per cent do not have any literate member aged 15 and above<sup>5</sup>. State-wise differences are wide - 70 per cent rural households in Rajasthan have no literate female adult and 33 per cent no literate adult; 66 per cent in Jharkhand have no literate female and 36 per cent no literate adult and in Bihar 65 per cent households have no literate female adult and 38 per cent no literate adult.

The implications of these findings are indeed serious. First, children from households with no literate parent are in the greatest need of pre-school education. Simple pre-school education material in the hands of a dedicated pre-school teacher would make a big difference to retention and learning in school. Equally, focused reading programmes, libraries and other activities that energise the learning environment will make a big difference to first-generation school goers and may well change the overall educational environment in the village.

It is important to view the life-cycle of children as a continuum - starting from when they are conceived till they complete elementary school and acknowledge the continuous and cumulative nature of the positive impact of healthy mothers, proper care during infancy, nutrition, care and stimulation during early childhood, pre-school education and primary schooling. Deprivation at one level invariably compounds the disadvantages faced by children in the next stage, ultimately leading to poor health and nutrition status and early withdrawal from school. Both the positives and the negatives are added on and compounded at the next level of a child's growth.

It may be too late to start worrying about the learning levels of children at class five or eight or worrying about why children studying in higher classes are not able to tackle even grade 1 or 2 level reading or arithmetic. ASER 2006 rightly turns the spotlight on two critical elements in the learning continuum - education status of mothers (and fathers) and pre-school education opportunities for children. It is time that the government reconsiders the policy of keeping all under-six out of the education sphere and introduce a pre-school / nursery section in all primary schools with a full time teacher and mid-day meal.

<sup>4</sup> Tables about mothers' education and ability to read are included in the National pages and each state page.

<sup>5</sup> Table 3.10.1, 61<sup>st</sup> Round NSS Survey Report Number 516, October 2006.