

## We need a real learning grid for India's elementary schools

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Around this time every year, news about the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey creates a short-lived stir in the media over the dismal performance of children studying in State-run elementary schools. Pratham — the NGO which produces the ASER reports — carries out this nationwide evaluation of children's competence in reading and arithmetic, and presents the results of children's grade-wise scores. The sample consists of nearly 57,000 children, so the sheer amount of aggregate data looks impressive. Sensational headlines usually follow: 'Many of India's children can't add, can't read' or '25% Class 8 children can't read Standard 2 text' and so on. ASER claims that children who attend State-run schools perform worse than those in private schools. ASER reports also highlight comparisons with previous years. For instance, while 60% of Class 8 children could read a simple text in English in 2009, only 47% could do so in 2014. The national picture, thus drawn, hints at a system that is unable to retain what little quality it had. Debates on TV are also nearly the same every January. Participants follow the anchor in lamenting the failure of governments to improve their schools, and panellists compete with each other to express their disenchantment with government schools, and especially their teachers.

So if scores haven't improved over a decade of ASER surveys, why bother to collect this data? In early years, ASER surveys were presented as 'wake up calls', apparently targeting slumber within the State machinery, including the HRD ministry at the Centre, and directorates of education in the states. The findings of the 2006 and subsequent surveys were analysed and discussed among officials and experts, and some implausible inter-regional differences and trends over time drew limited attention. Yet larger changes did not emerge, either in the government's response to ASER, or in ASER's own strategy.

This is, of course, sad. In a country where the State's responsibility to educate all its children is faced with formidable obstacles like shortage of resources, child labour and child marriage, a strong collaboration between State and social forces is needed to make a difference. To some extent, this has happened in the southern states, and the results are there for everyone to see. But ASER insists on presenting its findings as an overall, dark picture. If we look carefully, we find that ASER's tests are based on a crude understanding of learning during childhood. Compare the ASER tests with those developed by the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and some stark differences become apparent. ASER's reading test, for instance, is mechanical and focuses mainly on decoding. Global best practices in testing, on the other hand, highlight the importance of the child's search for meaning, which arises from the context portrayed in a text; an aspect that ASER largely ignores.

The surroundings for the actual testing also stand out. ASER tests happen in the child's home, and the ASER website shows pictures of a child completing the test while seated next to a stranger and oftentimes other adults. But the global benchmarks for achievement testing assiduously stick to the school — the place where children are most familiar with formal learning and with testing.

Most people also agree that statistics are best collected by skilled professionals. For instance, surveys for poverty lines are done by the National Sample Survey Organisation, and global scholastic tests like Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study or Programme for International Student Assessment are delivered by teachers. Yet those who administer ASER are an assortment of workers from organisations spanning government and NGOs. Some are functionaries of the state's education system, while some have no links with education. Yes, they are given a brief training for conducting ASER tests, but it is an open question as to whether and how a short training can make a person skilled and sensitive enough to approach a child and accurately examine her academic competence. Like the issue of home-based testing, it isn't clear how this remarkable diversity of data-gatherers biases the test scores, but it indicates some of the changes necessary if ASER is to become a serious scholastic exercise.

Notwithstanding such problems, ASER's findings seek and receive loud media attention, reflecting the wider, competitive cynicism with the role of the State in several parts of public life. Berating government schools vents this pervasive cynicism. Unfortunately, the attention ASER receives does not lead to analysis about the poverty of teacher training or the widespread corruption in the district-level bureaucracy. No one can argue that India's system of education is doing well. While the

government is familiar with the problems its schools have, it lacks the sustained desire and coherent strategy to address them.

NGOs are indeed expected to put pressure on the State apparatus into recognising problems and rectifying them. If for a major NGO the balance tilts towards building brand value by debunking the State, it ought to worry us. We hardly need reminding that the education policy is under pressure to prioritise ideological goals over rational planning. Pressure is building up on the State to withdraw further from providing education to the poor. Frequently under such attack and also under continuous fiscal pressures, the government's machinery is actively exacerbating its own problems. In many states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi (yes, even Delhi) it has taken recourse to destructive policies like whittling down teacher recruitment, which inevitably leads to high pupil-teacher ratios. It is in this context that ASER exists, occupies attention, and has the potential to provide useful inputs. Let us see whether it will change in ways that will help to play the role it ostensibly wants to play