

THE BIRTH OF ASER¹

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I remember a hot summer day, almost ten years ago, in a village in Sultanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. We were making a village report card.² Before starting work in a village we always did this exercise. Our goal then, as it is even today, was to work with people in the village to ensure that “every child is in school and learning well”. So we would go to every household in the village, and ask every child if he or she went to school. Ten years ago, even in UP, school enrollment levels were high. In some villages, well over 90% of children between the ages of six and fourteen were enrolled in school. But for us, it was important to go beyond schooling and try to get a sense of what a child could do. We used very basic benchmarks for learning - each and every child of elementary school age in the village was asked to read a set of common words and simple paragraphs. In arithmetic, there were numbers to be named and a set of simple arithmetic operations to do.

That morning in the village in Sultanpur, we went to the Pradhan (village headman) to tell him what we were going to do. The Pradhan took a cursory look at us and said “Achcha ... survey hai? Kariye, kariye!” (*Oh... it’s a survey? Please go ahead*). Accustomed to numerous surveys, he was not even interested in finding out what the survey was about.

In this village, like in many others, we moved from one hamlet to another, systematically going from one house to the next, talking to parents, interacting with children one on one. Questions like, “do your children go to school” got quick and sometimes disinterested answers.

But asking children to read grabbed everyone’s attention. Children would flock around, wanting to try. Parents would stop working and come to observe. Children who were playing in the fields put on shirts before coming to read. Mothers and fathers called their children back from wherever they were in the village to be “tested”. Children came down from trees where they were eating mangoes and jumped out of the village pond and came to see what was going on. Onlookers and observers would borrow the “testing tool” from us and start working with children themselves. One elderly grandmother took the paragraphs and sat in a corner sounding out the words to see if she could remember her letters and matras. In hamlet after hamlet, the exercise was suddenly transformed from a “survey” of collecting data into a hugely engaging exercise. Everyone wanted to immediately know how children were doing. The aim was to reach every child in the village so that the village report card for schooling and learning was a complete census and a starting point.

The curiosity was immense. What was striking was that many parents did not have any idea of whether their children could read or do arithmetic. This was true of both illiterate and literate parents. Young people who were watching the proceedings with interest came forward to help.

While the children read or did arithmetic, the adults would get intensively involved in discussing why the children could or could not do what they were being asked, who was to blame. It was as if two layers of debates and discussions were

going on simultaneously – one at the level of the children and another, higher up, at the level of the adults.

I remember an old lady shaking her head and saying “this is not a survey”, “Why not?” I asked her. She gave me the best definition of a survey that I have ever heard. She said, “a survey is when you don’t know but we know. A survey is when you come from the city to find out what the village folk are all about. But this is not a survey. Because you don’t know, and we don’t know and in fact, even the children don’t know what they can do. It is only when you ask them to read or do sums that we all find out. We find out together and we realize what our reality (“asliyaat”) is.”

After the home-by-home and child-by-child exercise in a hamlet was done, the “results” for the hamlet were declared. People waited with bated breath for the “count”. “There are 40 households and they have 75 children. 70 children go to school but only 35 of those who go to school can read or do sums”. Even as results were being digested, there was intense discussion on how this was not okay and what could be done to improve things. Clearly, by leaving the situation unattended, things would not sort themselves out. Urgent and rapid change was needed. In hamlet after hamlet, people agreed that schools must work, teachers must teach effectively and that parents or someone at home or in the neighbourhood too had to help. Only then would children’s learning begin to change.

Stepping back, and looking at the unfolding scene, you could see very clearly that the actual activity to generate the information was critical for the entire process to unfold. “Self discovery” was essential. Someone had to hold a mirror so that people could see themselves in it. Information mattered. It mattered because it was about children that everyone knew and cared about. It mattered because the information that was generated was new: before this, people had

not known to look closely at children’s learning and did not know how to look at it in this simple way. It mattered because people had seen the information being generated before their own eyes and often had participated in creating it. The simplicity of the tool and the method enabled people of all types to participate or at least to observe. And it was easy to digest the results – for their own children and for all the children in the neighbourhood, for individuals and for the aggregate. Whether people were literate or illiterate, it was obvious to all that their own school going children should be able to do these basic tasks.

In a few days, the village report card was ready. We went back to the pradhan. Without looking up from what he was doing he asked me where he should sign. There was nowhere that the report card needed a signature. Pradhanji thought this was very odd. He looked up at me and said, “Usually figures and numbers are collected because we have to send them to the higher ups. And for that I have to put my signature.” I tried to explain what the report card exercise had found. At the end of my explanation, he stated loudly, “The figures have to be wrong. How can it be that children are going to school and they cannot read?” The numbers and the explanation had upset him; the data went contrary to his perceptions and beliefs about reality in the village.

Now we had Pradhanji’s full attention. There was only one way to settle the issue. Armed with the reading tool, Pradhanji walked through the village. Every child he met was asked to read. By the tenth child, Pradhanji sat down, put his head in his hands and said, “*yeh to mere izzat ka sawal hai* . (This is a question of my honour). How can this be the situation with children in my village and I not know about it?” Immediately he called a village meeting, parents, teachers, children, people from the neighbourhood – all

were present. A big discussion ensued on what could be done. The journey from assessment to action had begun. Engagement and participation were critical activities for realizing what the problem was. Once the problem was visible and it was “owned” by everyone then the strategies for solving the problem began to flow.

The entire exercise now known as ASER – the Annual Status of Education Report - was based on hundreds of experiences like the one in the village in Sultanpur. The purpose of ASER is very similar to the village report cards for schooling and learning. Even in 2005, we could see that school enrollment levels were high. The credit for India’s high enrollment levels has to be given to parents who were demanding education and to governments who were providing schools. Going to school is a visible activity. Children who were not in school are easy to spot. Overall, the goal for universal enrollment is clear and visible to all – every child must be in school.

But as enrollment levels rise, it becomes important to think about what is happening inside schools, about how much “value” is being added to children’s capability each year that a child continues in school. It is time to move beyond schooling to understanding what children are learning. Unlike schooling, learning is much more invisible – it happens behind walls and inside classrooms. Illiterate or non-schooled parents and family members leave the business of learning to “experts” and educated people. They do not feel they can understand what learning entails or how they can contribute to improving their children’s learning. So if we as a country want “every child learning well” we need to demystify “learning”. We need ways to engage people so that learning can become more visible, more understandable and demonstrate activities in which ordinary parents, and family members, neighbours and youth can engage. The purpose of the assessment activity in the village report

card making process was to enable a broad cross-section of people to engage so that they can understand the situation and take appropriate action.

Around 2004 or so, nationally, two important events took place. First, the then new-UPA government began to speak of outlays to outcomes. For most social sector programs, the focus thus far had been on inputs and on delivery of services rather than on the outcomes. Second, more importantly, a new education cess of 2% was levied for elementary education. For both these reasons, it seemed important for citizens to turn their attention to outcomes in the education sector.

Since 2005, for eight years, ASER has been a nationwide citizens’ initiative to understand the status of children’s schooling and learning. Like the movement from assessment to action at the village level, the aim of ASER is to initiate similar movements at the district and state level. The “learning” in ASER refers to basic reading and arithmetic. We focus on basic capabilities so that even an illiterate mother can see what the child needs to be able to do. ASER is done in every rural district in the country every year. Using a common set of simple tools and a common sampling frame, in each district there is a local organization that conducts ASER and then disseminates its findings. ASER 2012 was carried out by over 500 local institutions and organizations across the country and by more than 25,000 volunteers. Together they reached 16,000 villages, over 300,000 households and well over 600,000 children.

Like the exercise of village report cards, ASER too is fundamentally based on notion that we need to understand the situation before we can act. To understand the situation, we need curiosity – we need to see if indeed there is a problem. We need simple ways to answer the questions that we have. Simple measures and methods help

everyone to participate and engage. If we do not know, we cannot act. Only when we understand, can we think of what to do next. Waiting for the government alone to improve things will take a long time. Like Pradhanji and the parents in the village, it is essential that we get involved in

measuring, then understanding, and then acting to improve the future of our children. Some say that ASER leads to greater accountability; we say ASER leads to understanding, ownership and responsibility for action. This is how ASER was born and this is why it is done year after year.

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¹ASER stands for the Annual Status of Education Report. Details of the reports can be found on www.asercentre.org

²We, in this case, refers to the Pratham teams working in rural areas.