

ANECDOTE

PRATHAM NEWSLETTER
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Pratham USA

Every Child In School and Learning Well

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 honor). How can this be the situation with children in my village and I not know about it?”

EXCERPT FROM THE BIRTH OF ASER

2005 seems not such a long time ago. All around us there was a new mood in the country—a new government in place, talk of outlays to outcomes and a new education cess to support universalization of elementary education. Well over 90% of children were enrolled in school. We at Pratham felt it was the right time to inject a new element into the conversation about education in India—to ask whether children were learning?



At the time, wherever Pratham programs existed, in a village or in an urban community, our teams would create report cards. These assessments were the first step in our work. Using the simple tools (that later came to be known as the ASER tools), we would talk to every child and meet every family. For each child we asked whether the child went to school. Then we would encourage the child to do a few basic reading and arithmetic tasks. People in the community would also participate in the assessment.

Once the entire village was covered, we would have a meeting and discuss the findings. Let’s say there were 100 children, we would find that more than 90 were enrolled in school but only about 50 could read a few simple lines. There would be consternation and confusion among the adults—many of whom had not been to school themselves. If a child went to school, how was it

that he or she was not learning? The village community would discuss different dimensions of the problem. Pratham would offer solutions by demonstrating methods to help children pick up basic skills quickly. Assessment led to awareness and in turn action.

If this process of assessment to action worked in a village, could it also work at the level of a district or state—or even the country? There was only one way to find out. To try it. The decision was made. Pratham would facilitate ASER, the Annual Status of Education Report. We would do this for the whole country. The day we made this decision was a Sunday and it was the second of October—Gandhiji’s birthday.

Almost ten years have passed since that day in October in 2005. Every year since then, ASER has gone to every rural district in India. The mammoth ASER exercise has taken place like clockwork. Today we know much more about the status of schooling and learning in our country than we did before.

Today too, there is a new wave across India and new hopes and expectations. As we celebrate our tenth year of ASER, we think it is indeed possible to have every child reading and doing basic arithmetic if citizens and governments work together towards this basic and common goal.

We are very thankful to our supporters and benefactors, individual and institutional, who have been with us on this journey. None of this would have been possible without you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Rukmini Banerji,

Director of Pratham’s ASER Centre



THE SURVEY

The largest citizen-led survey in India, ASER reaches more than 300,000 households and 600,000 children annually to collect information about school enrollment and learning levels. Roughly 25,000 volunteers from more than 500 partner organizations participate in data collection, which covers every rural district in the country.

Now in its 10th year, ASER continues to transform educational policy in India by quantifying the magnitude of the learning crisis in a way that anyone can understand; in 2013 the report found that nearly half of all fifth graders were unable to read a second grade text or solve a basic math problem.

AS TINA ROSENBERG OPINES IN THE NEW YORK TIMES...

“ASER is more than a survey. By making children’s learning visible to parents, teachers and policymakers, it has become a mobilizing force for better-quality education. It has helped to turn the government’s focus beyond enrollment, toward learning. And Pratham is not just diagnosing the problem. It is also introducing simple methods that teach children basic skills. Because of ASER, communities and now states are adopting these methods in learning camps and during the school day.”

Read the full article at: opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/in-india-revealing-the-children-left-behind/

FROM THE ASER TRAIL

ONCE THERE WAS A BOY

Sajal Ghosh, ASER Associate, West Bengal

I spent my early childhood in a small village in the Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal. There was no school building so classes were held under a tree. Despite the lack of physical structure, electricity or roads, the other children and I flourished because the teachers at this school under the tree were devoted to us. After second grade, my family and I left the village.

Twenty-two years later, I returned to conduct the ASER survey. In the years that had passed, the village had experienced tremendous growth—it now had pucca roads, electricity, a post office, hospitals—and even a school building! In fact, more students in the village than ever before were enrolled.

When I reached the school, I met a teacher and the headmaster who were about to leave the premises. But it was only 11:45 am! There were no kids and the classrooms were locked. When one of the volunteers requested that the headmaster permit us to survey the school, he ignored us. I then inquired about the school timetable, which led to a conversation about the current school system and ASER.

That’s when the headmaster confessed that despite improved infrastructure, development and high enrollment, attendance was an issue at the school. This was evident when we began to test children in the village. The overall learning level was poor. But it was an ideal opportunity to start discussing “schooling versus learning” with the teachers, parents and villagers.

ASER’s testing tools helped us explain the situation in a manner that everyone understood. We left the village telling them this, “you can change the situation; do it for a better society.”

DID YOU KNOW?

The ASER Centre is an autonomous unit of Pratham.



Apart from the ASER survey, the Centre carries out independent research studies and develops assessment tools.

The Centre houses a MME Unit, which measures, monitors and evaluates Pratham programs.

Major supporters of the ASER Centre include Pratham USA, Hewlett Foundation, Douglas B. Marshall, Jr. Family Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, The World Bank, UNICEF, Central Square Foundation and Kusuma Trust.

Learn more at asercentre.org.



Photo: [Dana Schmidt/Hewlett Foundation](#)

A COLLECTIVE ACCOMPLISHMENT

Melissa Goodnight, former intern at the ASER Centre

What strikes a newcomer about ASER is the exceptional effort dedicated to capturing just one village. The process is impressive—astounding even—when one realizes it happens in village after village, district after district, and state after state, until the whole of rural India is mapped and surveyed.

For the ASER surveyor, the process is a continuous dialogue with the community; people come out from their doorways, offices and shops to help, to talk and to share their time and knowledge. They stand as you pass; they press their hands together as you approach; they inquire about what you are trying to do and why.

Children shout “hi,” “hello,” “namaste” in hopes that a smile or a few words will be exchanged in return for their boldness. Men, young and old, assist in sketching the village’s major features and assure you that your final map is accurate, with the major landmarks (private clinic, health centre, post office, school, temple, and bank) placed properly and the main roads laid out.

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“HI,” “HELLO,”
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BOLDNESS.**

Women of every age greet you at the entrance of their homes and answer your questions with kindness, patience and hospitality. They recount the details of their families, education and household resources as they offer you a chair, a glass of water and a cup of tea. The children

being sampled carefully study the assessment questions and then diligently work through a division problem or a passage of text.

Then there is the school where you collaborate with teachers and the headmaster to note the details of attendance, school facilities, faculty, and so on. Children crowd around during their lunch break or watch intently from their seats in the classroom. To look only at the outcome of the surveying of a village—the tick marks, numbers and names entered on a sheet—is to be misled into thinking that the process is simple, bland and quick. ASER volunteers do not swoop into a village and mechanically produce data. Rather, the process is far more humanistic. It relies on goodwill and an implicit, persistent hopefulness that is shared—it is the hope that education is the community’s pathway to a bright and inspiring future.

Read more stories over at the [ASER blog](#).

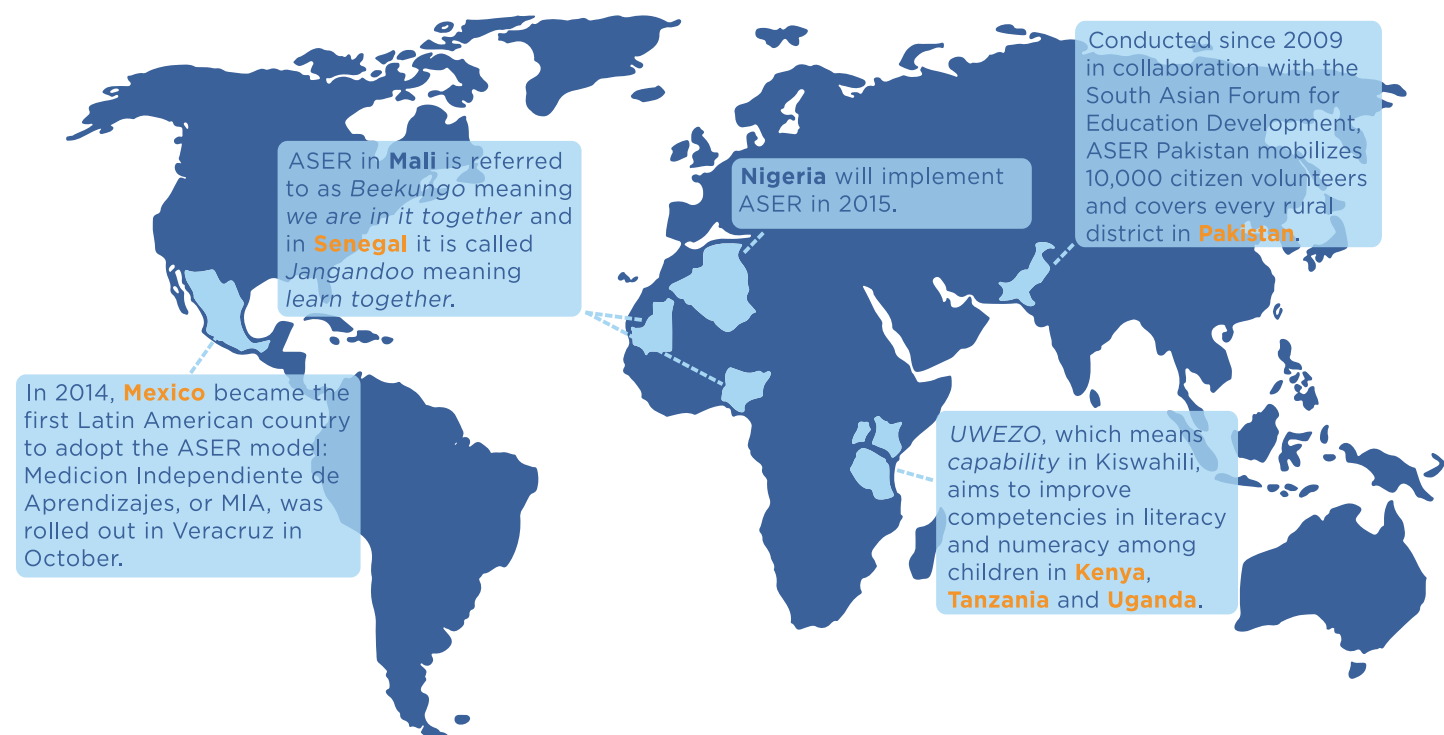


“ASER TACKLES THE CHALLENGE OF MEASURING LEARNING OUTCOMES AND USING THIS INFORMATION TO DRIVE IMPROVEMENTS IN SCHOOLS. THE ISSUE IS CRITICAL AND THE ASER MODEL, NOW 10 YEARS OLD, IS BEST-IN-CLASS.”

HOMI KHARAS

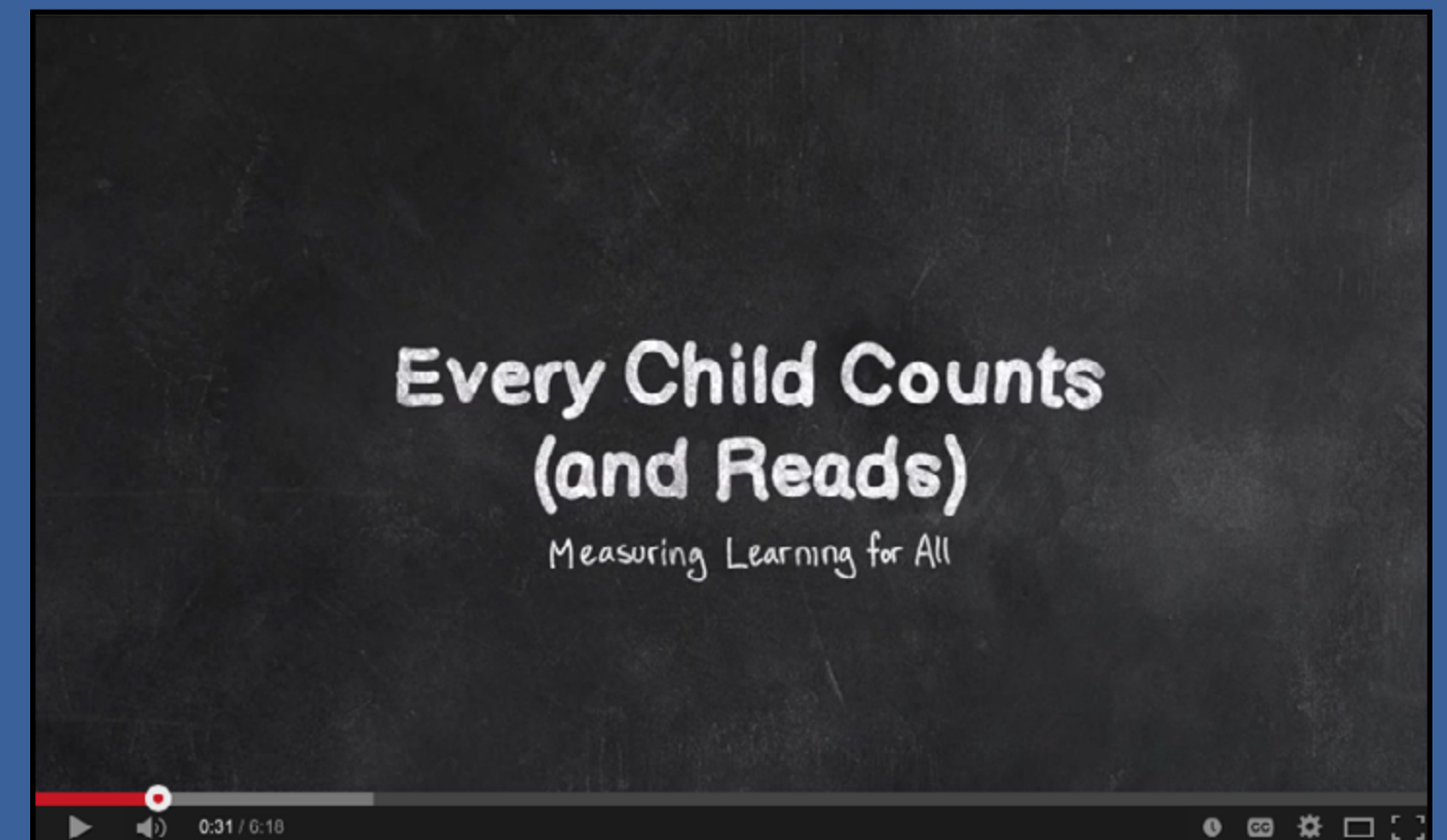
SENIOR FELLOW AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR
THE GLOBAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT,
BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Pratham’s ASER survey was shortlisted as one of ten finalists for the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) 2014 Prize for Taking Innovation to Scale. Jurors cited ASER’s rigorous methodology, uniform procedures and simple assessment tools that are easy to administer and understand, enabling them to be implemented elsewhere. Today, the model is used in close to a dozen countries in Asia and Africa and starting this year, Mexico.



THROUGH THESE EFFORTS OVER A **MILLION** CHILDREN ARE ASSESSED ANNUALLY.

EVERY CHILD COUNTS (AND READS)



CLICK THE IMAGE TO WATCH A VIDEO AND LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CITIZEN-LED, HOUSEHOLD-BASED ASSESSMENTS TOOLS THAT MEASURE LEARNING.

ABOUT PRATHAM

Founded in 1995 to ensure that every child is in school and learning well, Pratham is now one of the largest non-governmental organizations in India’s education sector. Pratham uses low-cost and scalable methods and works in partnership with government and community stakeholders to provide quality education to underprivileged children in urban and rural communities across 20 Indian states.

Pratham USA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a four-star rating (the highest possible) from Charity Navigator, accepts tax deductible contributions from US donors to create educational reform throughout India. For more information, visit prathamusa.org.