



# Schooling to Learning: How ASER Shaped India's Education Discourse and Policy by Measuring Learning Reading and Arithmetic

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## Abstract

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey is a household-base Survey of school aged children in all rural districts in India. It is the only annual survey that yields data on children's basic learning levels in the country. The ASER aims to obtain reliable, district- level estimates of the status of rural children's school enrolment and skills in reading and arithmetic and to measure the changes in the estimates over time. The target population for the reading and arithmetic assessments is children living in rural areas who are aged between 5 to 16 years. ASER has been very successful at illuminating the Learning crisis, bringing learning to the forefront of policy and education discourse nationally and internationally, and inspiring the creation of interventions that promote foundational learning. The organization started to do this by trying to determine the literacy levels of students based on whether they could identify letters, read words, read sentences, or read paragraphs, and the numeracy levels of the students based on whether they could identify double-digit numbers, perform double-digit subtraction or divide by a single digit. Since then, ASER has been reporting on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) for the elementary school age group either every year or every two years and is the first and Largest to do so in India. ASER has been an autonomous unit within the Pratham network.

**Key Words-** Survey, Enrolment, FLN.

## INTRODUCTION-

As per the National Education Policy (NEP-2020), the highest priority for the school education system is to achieve universal acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills at primary level by 2025. Foundational learning is the basis of all future learning for a child. Not achieving basic foundational skills of being able to read with comprehension, writing and doing basic mathematical operations, leaves the child unprepared for the complexities of the curriculum beyond grade 3. So far, following major incentives have been taken under NIPUN Bharat Mission- Constitution of National Steering Committee for the implementation of NIPUN Bharat Mission. Development of Vidya Pravesh Guidelines and Module for Grade 1 Launch of NISHTHA-FLN for Teachers and school heads of preschool teachers/Anganwadi workers. Conduct of Foundational Learning Study (FLS). Creation of DIKSHA FLN portal for availability of FLN resources conduct of 100 days Reading portion. FLN stands for foundational literacy and numeracy. The aim of this network is to make sure that the children are enjoying fully the benefits and learning means. The Targets for FLN have been stated in four areas- Oral language, Reading, Writing and Numeracy. The vision of the Mission is to create an enabling environment to ensure universal acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy, so that by 2026-27 every child achieves the desired learning competencies in reading, writing and numeracy at the end of Grade III and not later than Grade V. The Learning outcomes for Foundational learning have been divided into 3 three developmental goals: Goal 1-HW (Health and Wellbeing), Goal 2-EC (Effective Communicators), Goal 3-IL (Involved Learners).

**Key competencies of each goal have also been identified.**

- The developmental goals have been further divided into six levels corresponding to the 3 years of ECCE followed by 3 years of schooling.

Each learning outcome has been given a number/code for easy identification and referencing. It is important to

understand that these numbers are not hierarchical, but these experiences can be provided simultaneously in an integrated way. The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 prioritises the attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) for all children as an “urgent national mission”. Subsequent guidelines for the same were laid out in the Ministry of Education’s National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN-Bharat) programme in 2021.

### **WHAT HAPPENED?**

Most of India’s children were enrolled in primary and elementary schools by the 1990s (Government of India, 2018). While most children were in schools, just over a half of India’s population was literate in this time period. This was confusing: after spending more than eight years in school, how could citizens not even read?

In 1995, a civil society organization called the Prathama Education Foundation was established and focused on the question of schooling and learning in India. Prathama recognized that in order to help children learn in school, we must first measure what children have already learned. Over time, this resulted in the development of the largest citizen-led household survey of children that is still the only representative survey of learning levels in India today: the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2021). ASER has been very successful at highlighting the learning crisis, bringing learning to the forefront of policy and education discourse nationally and internationally, and for inspiring the creation of interventions to strengthen foundational learning.

### **CONTEXT**

In 1990-91, the gross enrolment ratios in India’s primary schools (standards I-V) and elementary schools (standards I-VIII) were 83.8 percent and 78.6 percent respectively (Government of India, 2018). In 2000-01, gross enrolment had increased in India’s primary and elementary schools to 95.7 percent and 81.6 percent respectively. Overall, most children were attending schools. In contrast, learning levels remained low. Literacy rates for ages seven and above (one of the few nationally representative measures of learning available at the time) in 1991 were

52.2 percent and in 2001 were 64.8 percent respectively. With more than 80 percent of the population in school, and literacy being one of the foundational elements taught in school, it was surprising that a significant proportion of the population still could not read.

### **ABOUT THE ANNUAL STATUS OF EDUCATION REPORT**

With questions arising on the ‘quality’ of education being imparted in schools, it soon became clear that there were no regular and reliable district-level measures of basic learning outcomes with which to answer these questions. Simultaneously, evidence was needed with which to understand the status of education and to take informed action. Having started work in 1995, the Pratham Education Foundation tackled issues of learning in school by trying to identify what children did know. The organisation started to do this by trying to determine the literacy levels of students based on whether they could identify letters, read words, read sentences, or read paragraphs, and the numeracy levels of students based on whether they could identify single-digit numbers, identify double-digit numbers, perform double digit subtraction (with carrying), or divide by a single digit.

Almost a decade later in 2005, this measurement of literacy and numeracy became formally known as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER): a citizen-led household-based survey of children’s learning with the goal of covering all of India’s 600-plus districts in a reliable manner that is representative at the district, state, and national levels. Since then, ASER has been reporting on foundational literacy and numeracy for the elementary school age group either every year or every two years and is the first and largest to do so in India. ASER reaches between 500,000 to 700,000 children each

year, with the survey being conducted by 25,000 volunteers from 500 partner institutions annually. Since 2008, ASER has been an autonomous unit within the Pratham network.

ASER has many unique qualities and contributions that make it so powerful. Firstly, the surveys measure foundational learning, where foundational learning comprises the basic skills all children are expected to have after the first few years of school that are prerequisites for more advanced learning during the rest of the schooling period. Secondly, the survey is conducted orally and individually with each child. This is key considering that children who are not literate cannot be assessed with a written test, where written tests are usually the norm because they are easier to conduct at scale. Thirdly, the survey is designed in a simple, cost effective, and scalable manner.

### **ILLUMINATING THE LEARNING CRISIS**

When ASER was launched, there were no measurements of learning levels in the early grades of primary school, meaning that students would automatically progress to the next grade even if they had not mastered the necessary prerequisites to succeed in the next grade. ASER challenged that concept by illuminating the magnitude of the learning crisis that was present in India. The tasks on the ASER test aligned well with the expected skill levels of students completing standard 2 or starting standard 3 according to most state curricula in India. Every year, ASER has highlighted that learning levels are low, and that learning trajectories have even declined in some years.

- In 2005, 35 percent of all students 7 to 14 years old in rural India could not read a simple paragraph, and 41 percent could not do two-digit subtraction (ASER, 2006).
- In 2010, 41 percent of all students 7 to 14 years old in rural India could not read a simple paragraph, and 47.8 percent could not do two-digit subtraction (ASER, 2011).
- In 2016, 57.6 percent of standard 3 students could not read a standard 1 level simple paragraph, and 72.5 percent of standard 3 students could not do two-digit subtraction (ASER, 2017).
- In 2018, 55.5 percent of standard 3 students could not read a standard 1 level simple paragraph, and 71.9 percent of standard 3 students could not do two-digit subtraction (ASER, 2019).

These show a fairly similar picture of learning since the inception of ASER measurements, with the takeaway being that learning is very low and not improving much.

### **DATA ANALYSIS-**

#### **ENROLMENT-**

- 1- Despite school closures during the pandemic, overall enrolment figures have increased from 97.7% in 2018 to 98.4% in 2022.
- 2- The proportion of children (age 6 to 14) enrolled in government school increased sharply from 65.6% in 2018 to 79.2% in 2022.
- 3- The proportion of 3-year-olds enrolled in some form of early childhood education is 78.3% in 2022, an increase of 7.1 percentage points over 2018 levels.

#### **Private Tuition-**

- 1- Nationally, the proportion of children in class I-VIII taking paid private tuition classes increased from 26.4% in 2018 to 30.5% in 2022.

**Arithmetic-**

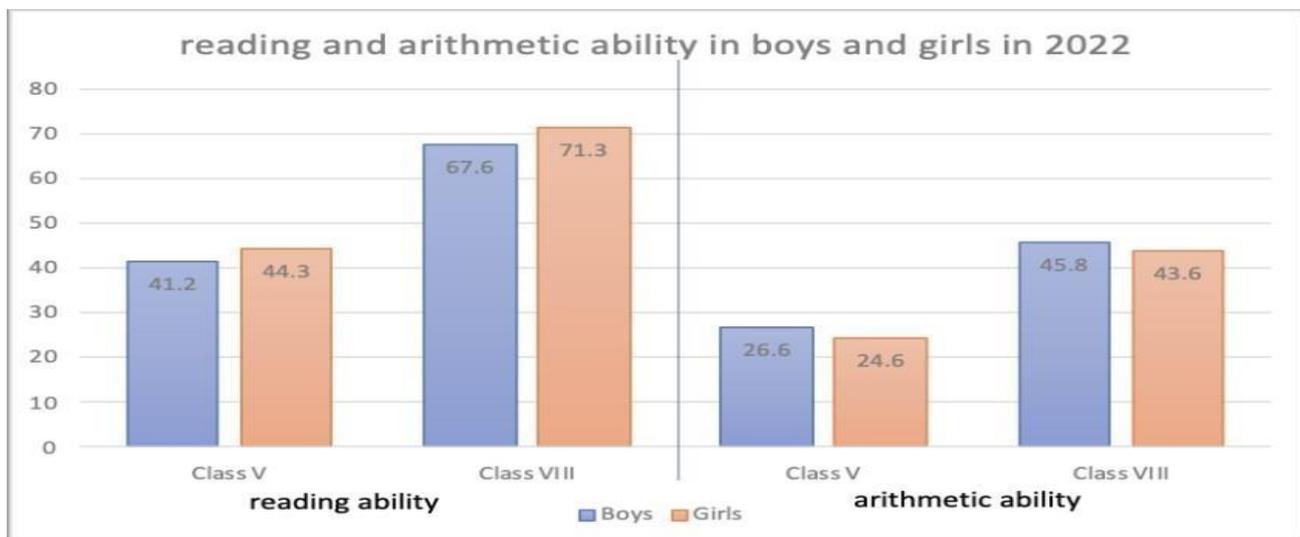
- 1- Nationally, children's basic arithmetic levels have declined over 2018 levels for most grades.
- 2- Class III: The All India figure for children in Class III who are able to at least do Subtraction dropped from 28.2% in 2018 to 25.9% in 2022.
- 3- Class V: Proportion of children in class V across India who can do division has fallen slightly, from 27.9% in 2018 to 25.6% in 2022.

**Reading-**

- 1- Children's basic reading ability has dropped to pre-2012 levels.
- 2- Class III- The percentage of children in class III in government or private schools who can read at class II level dropped from 27.3% in 2018 to 20.8% in 2022.
- 3- Class V- Nationally, the proportion of children enrolled in class V in government or private schools who can at least read a class II level text fell from 50.5% in 2018 to 42.8% in 2022.

**Reading Ability****Arithmetic Ability**

CLASS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS
CLASS- V	41.2	44.3	26.6	24.6
CLASS- VIII	67.6	71.3	45.8	43.6



The findings of the ASER report is that girls tend to perform better in reading skills in classes V and VIII than boys. Meanwhile, boys are better at arithmetic at the Grade V and Grade VIII levels than girls.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This case shows the importance of measuring learning regularly, reliably, and relevantly, and to design measurements that are simple and easy to understand. This case yields the following policy implications:

1. **Investigate policy assumptions using rigorous data.** ASER was born out of questions surrounding schooling and

learning to explore whether schooling resulted in learning. This is one of the reasons ASER was so important: it provided the evidence with which to evaluate a crucial assumption, and ultimately was able to decipher the flaw in the assumption that would have been detrimental if not noticed.

2. **Keep assessments simple and easy to understand.** One of the reasons behind ASER's success was the simplicity of the tool and the ease of interpreting its results. Realising that much of the population in India was uneducated and unaware of what children should be learning, ASER kept its tools and results very simple. This allowed even the layperson to understand key benchmarks and to foster accountability from the community level, while also allowing the tool to be easily administered with low cost.
3. **Assessments do not have to be expensive to be effective.** The ASER tool is low-cost and scalable, which was an important consideration given the survey's goal of being representative at the district, state and national levels amidst the large size and population of India. Part of this is the use of volunteers to administer the test (citizen-led) and that very few resources (only a few printouts per volunteer) are required to administer the test. This is part of the reason behind ASER being able to continue collecting and publishing data regularly, making it a reliable and household name.

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