

## Basic questions on education

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The ASER data will no doubt lead to a great deal of discussion in the days to come. There is no dearth of issues. For instance, are states that have received the greatest sums under SSA the ones where the most number of children have been enrolled, or where the dropout rates have come down

significantly? What is the quality of learning in such states? Is it linked to other factors, such as the level of community awareness and involvement?

Why is it that Bihar and West Bengal, despite all their other problems, have performed so well in the learning assessments, not just of ASER, but also of NCERT, while the southern states have fared comparatively poorly?

The first of these was commissioned by the government and carried out by IMRB, while the other, the Annual State of Education Report (ASER), was undertaken by Pratham, an NGO working in the field of elementary education, with the help of more than 750 voluntary agencies, as well as several concerned citizens.

The IMRB survey was carried out between July and September last year and covered nearly 90,000 urban and rural households. According to its findings, nearly 6.94 per cent of all children in the target age group, or 13.4 million children, are out of school.

The ASER survey, the results of which were released on January 17, 2006, was undertaken between October and December 2005. It covered about 190,000 households and 330,000 children in 485 districts of 28 states.

This survey concludes that 6.6 per cent of children between the ages of six and 14, or nearly 11 million, are out of school. The real issue, though, is not one of numbers. As long as even one child is out of school and deprived of education, that is one child too many.

Both surveys found that the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh accounted for the highest number of children not in school. It is here that special strategies may need to be implemented.

However, processes inside the classroom are a different issue altogether. A disturbing finding of ASER is that of the children surveyed in classes VI to VIII in government-run schools, 22 per cent could not read simple passages, while 40 per cent could not do simple division.

Not that private schools have much cause to feel happier a comparison of government and private schools shows that the difference in results was only about 10%. Sadly, this appears to be the case across the world.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2003 found that 11 per cent of children in OECD countries could not do level one mathematics, while 7 per cent were below level one in [reading](#) literacy.

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ASER is remarkable for more than just the data that it has thrown up. It represents a unique exercise, taken up with the help of voluntary agencies and concerned citizens. It is precisely this kind of community involvement that is the cornerstone of SSA.

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