LEARNING TO READ

ASER Discussion Series – Volume 2

ASER Discussion Series is meant to provide a platform for people concerned about education to debate issues, methodologies, and analyze/interpret the data generated by ASER and other studies and surveys. This is an occasional publication / e-newsletter and will carry commentaries by a wide range of people - academics, policy makers and practitioners.

For this issue, we would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Suman Bhattacharjea in bringing the issue together and Suzanne Singh for coordinating the production and design.

We would also like to thank all the contributors for the promptness of response. There were several others who would have written for this issue if there had been time. We thank all of these for their interest and enthusiasm and hope that they will write for subsequent issues.

As always, our gratitude to Vimala Ramachandran for her guidance and advice.

For comments and inputs on this issue, please write to us at aser@pratham.org

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THE असर (IMPACT)
OF
ASER
SOME HARD QUESTIONS

ASER discussion series – an occasional publication – is out again. The last two years have been exciting. In 2005-06, we barely came to grips with the sheer magnitude of an all-India sample survey of learning levels.

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The findings were alarming and also controversial. Yet, having persisted with it, the organizing teams were able to streamline logistics and build the capacities of field investigators. Many of the young volunteers across the country were doing this the second time round. They had participated in post ASER 2005 discussions and were perhaps more aware of what they were doing and why. The research team was also more vigilant – trying to ensure that the sampling procedure was followed more rigorously. Greater attention was paid to translation of the test papers into different languages. As the Pratham team sat down to analyse the data of ASER 2006 a number of issues emerged. This discussion series is an attempt to flag the issues and generate a debate.

India is a country of rich linguistic diversity – different scripts, different grammar and different structures. The question that begs attention is whether a test can be uniform across different Indian languages? Further, can the testing mechanism be similar for children who speak another language at home and those who speak the medium of instruction at home? In the course of ASER 2005 and 2006 it became apparent that these are not just academic questions, they have huge implications when a nation-wide assessment of learning is attempted. While a nation-wide testing process has turned the spotlight on learning in schools – both government schools as well as private, it is also important to ask whether the tests adequately measure the reading comprehension of children. Fluent reading may not be possible without comprehending what one is reading, yet there is a need to work on ways to capture reading with comprehension.

We are not only faced with linguistic diversity. Children in India go to different kinds of schools – from rural primary schools with one teacher handling several classes to schools with one teacher per class. There are schools with almost no facilities and others that are well endowed. Equally, there are schools where testing is done regularly and at periodic intervals and there are others where children are not exposed to regular testing. There are schools where testing goes hand in hand with fear and intimidation and there are others where this may not be the case. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the social and emotional readiness of children going to different kinds of schools and living in different kinds of family structures would no doubt be different. Some children may have taken the ASER test quite happily and others may have been intimidated. The important issue here is that as Pratham and its partners move on to ASER 2007 and also Urban ASER – the tools used need to be continuously refined. Equally, as ASER gains in experience the understanding, preparedness and skills of the investigating team will also improve. A debate would certainly help in the process of refining the tools and would also provide a better understanding of the testing process.

Another question that invariably pops up when ASER is discussed is its impact on the "system" or "society". As a researcher who travels across the country, I noted that the findings evoke strong reactions. In some states the bureaucracy reacted angrily, questioning the testing process, the translation of the tools and the merit of testing at home. In some institutions and universities educationists questioned the very process of testing and the validity of the findings. In some other states and institutions the reaction is quite the opposite. Demystifying the testing process and giving ordinary people a tool to measure if their children are learning in school has been received with great enthusiasm by community-based organisations and some NGOs too. During a recent interaction with some NGOs in Rajasthan I was pleasantly surprised when they wanted to integrate an ASER kind of assessment into their ongoing educational programme and use it as an advocacy tool to encourage parents to take greater interest in what is happening in the schools. Some NGOs plan to move away from routine service delivery kind of work (running parallel centres / schools, tuition classes) and move on to engaging with the formal school system. They ask if an accelerated learning programme followed by a community library could create the necessary momentum for learning? Can a vigilant community of parents exert greater pressure on the schools to perform?

The silver lining is that ASER and similar initiatives initiated in the last few years have definitely churned up the educational scenario. This in itself is a step forward.

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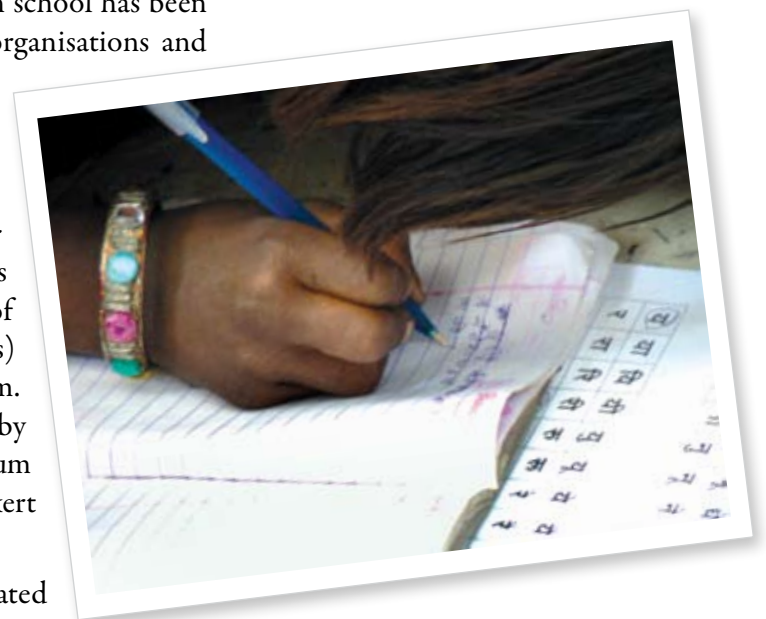
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IN SCHOOL BUT NOT READING

The ASER 2006 snapshot of basic learning levels in elementary school should cause serious concern among parents, practitioners and policy-makers.

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Children are going to school (over 93% of the 6-14 year age group are enrolled), but a huge majority are clearly not learning the basics at the right time or at the right pace. This discussion paper, the first of a series based on major findings emerging from the ASER 2006 survey, focuses on children's reading ability in primary school.

The ASER data illustrate the nature and magnitude of the problem country wide:

- Half of all children are being left behind. Aggregated to the all India level, ASER 2006 (rural) shows that:

    * In Std. I, almost half of all children are unable to read alphabets.

    * In Std. II, almost half of all children are unable to read words.

    * In Std. III, almost half of all children are unable to read Std. I level text.

    * In Std. V almost half of all children are unable to read Std. II level text.

Source: ASER (Rural) 2006
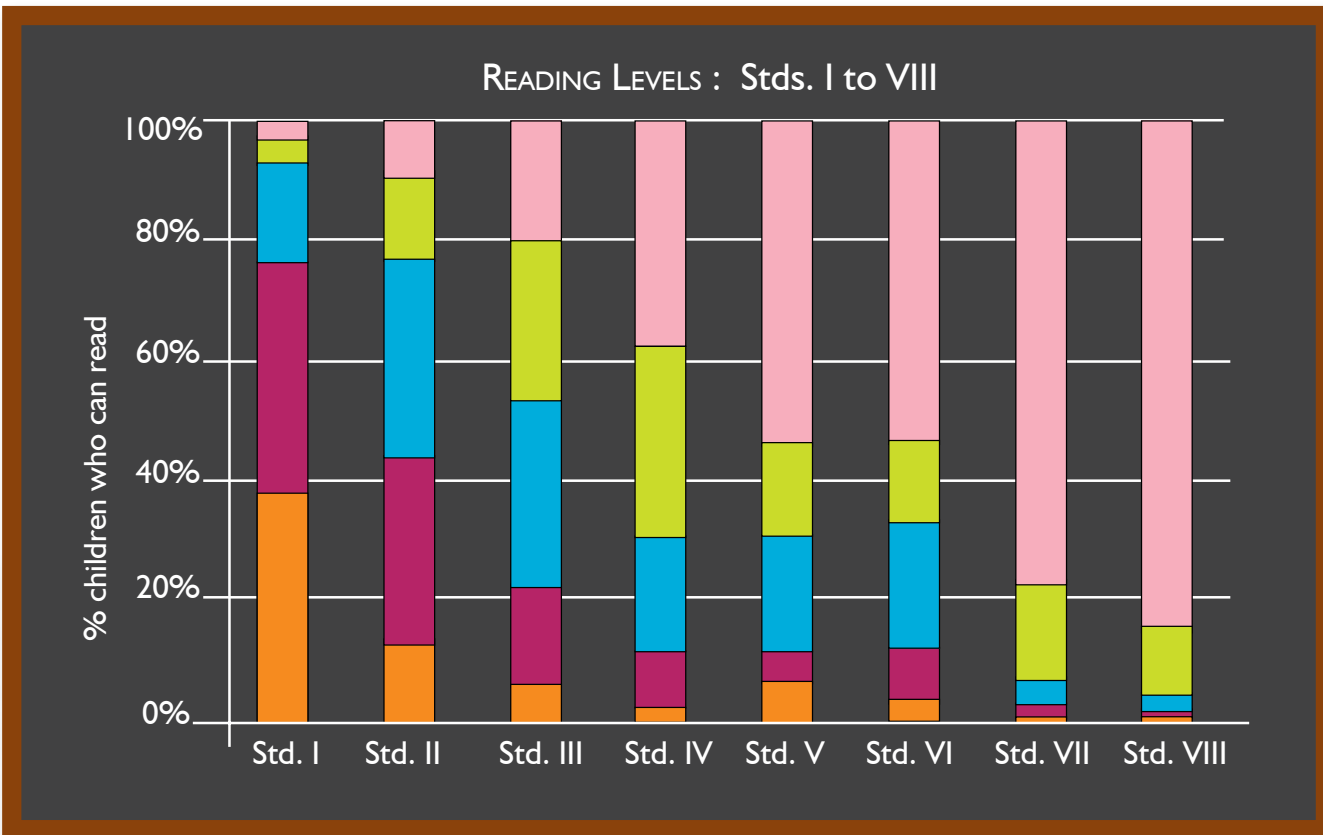
	Std. I	Std. II	Std. III	Std. IV	Std. V	Std. VI	Std. VII	Std. VIII
Std. II level story	2.58	8.23	19.83	37.61	53.01	66.61	76.21	83.80
Std. I level para	4.00	15.07	28.14	31.77	28.19	22.96	17.39	12.51
Word	16.86	32.65	29.29	18.67	11.83	6.64	4.09	2.26
Letter	38.37	30.12	16.54	8.96	4.94	2.54	1.54	0.86
Nothing	38.20	13.93	6.21	2.99	2.04	1.25	0.77	0.57

- Children fall behind early. The data for Std. III children suggest that inadequate attention and lack of focus on reading begins during the first two years of primary schooling.

  * At the all-India level, barely 20% of all Std. III students can read at Std. II level.
  * In 15 states the percentage of Std. III children who can read at Std. II level is lower than the national average of 20%.

READING ABILITY : In Std. III by State

Source: ASER (Rural) 2006

Legend: Below Std. II | At or beyond Std. II
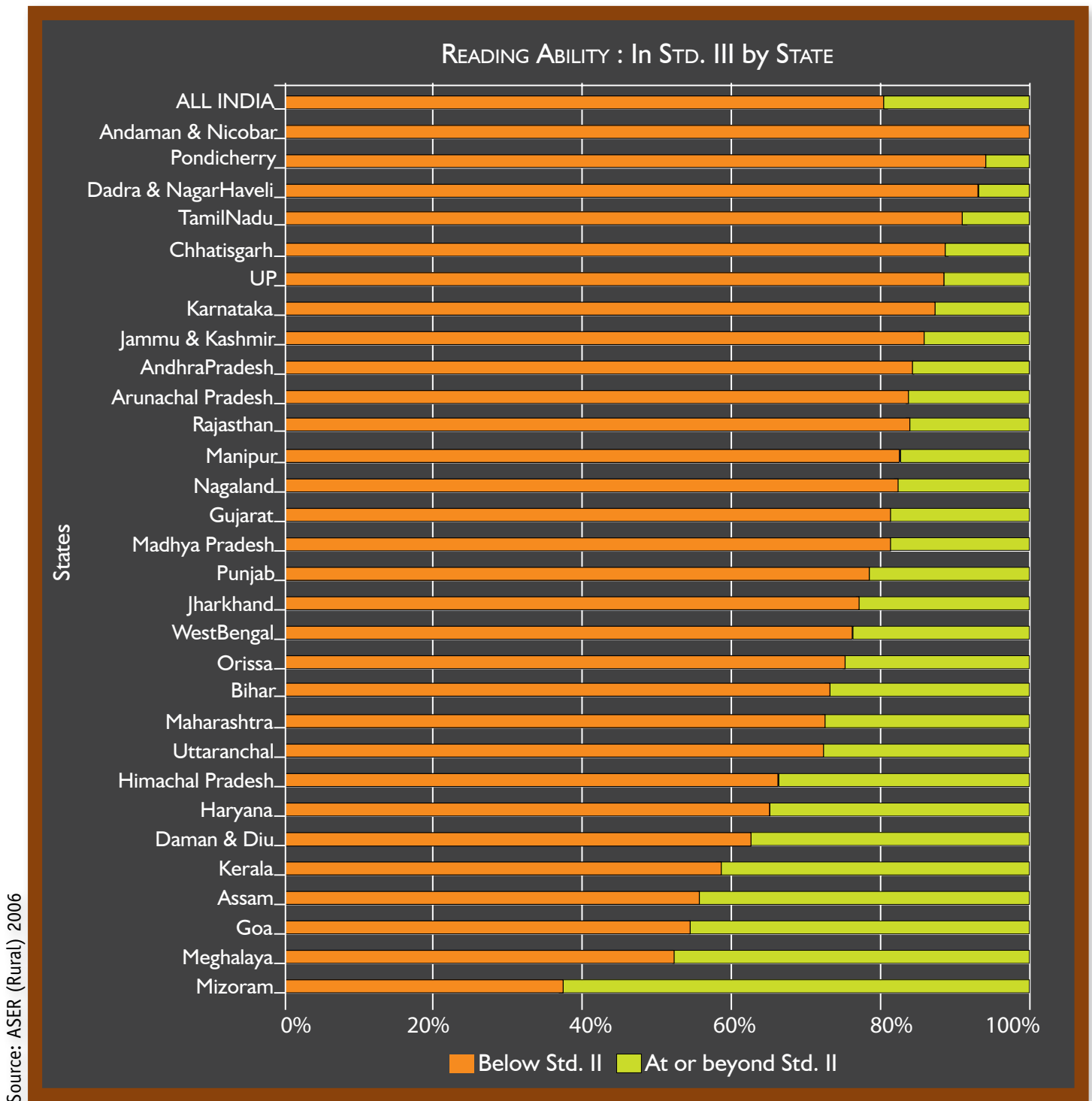
This early inability to ensure that children gain grade-appropriate reading skills obviously intensifies the subsequent burden on both children and teachers, as children move up to higher classes, academic complexity increases, and schools struggle to impart grade-appropriate content to under-prepared students. ASER 2006 data confirms that this is a losing battle: In Std. VI, after having completed the recommended minimum of 5 years of education fully, one third of all students cannot read at the level established for Std. II.

It is well established that a variety of factors influence children's learning. These include socioeconomic background, family support, and school conditions, among others. However, the overwhelming and inescapable conclusion that emerges from the ASER 2006 data is that the pedagogical problems regarding how primary schools approach and teach reading are both well-entrenched and widespread.

These findings pose a series of questions which are the focus of this discussion paper.

First is the issue of testing methodology. Evaluating reading ability is not a simple task, and although a variety of actors in different parts of the country have identified and addressed many aspects of children's learning in primary school, there are no comparable national-level surveys with which to compare the ASER results. Therefore, it becomes vital to generate a forum for debate around the methodology itself. For example: do the testing instruments provide an adequate measure of children's reading ability? Is it reasonable to assume that reading ability develops in the same way and at the same pace across the many languages in which reading is taught, or are there language-specific issues that should be taken into account?

Second, this discussion paper explores the implications of these findings for educational policy and practice. Given that ASER 2006 paints a grim picture of children's reading ability at the primary level nationwide, where do the key difficulties arise, and what should be done about them? As actors in many states focus their attention on issues of school quality, what sorts of initiatives are being planned and implemented with respect to children's reading, and with what results? Given the enormous magnitude of the problem, can the scaling-up of demonstrably successful interventions provide a solution, and what would be the pedagogical, organizational, financial, and other implications for the educational system?

The inability to read has huge and obvious implications for dropout rates within the educational system and for children's level of preparedness for the future. A child who cannot read will be at an increasing disadvantage in an academic system and in a society where the transmission of knowledge depends heavily on the printed word. The surge in attention towards and investment in the educational system in recent years becomes a complete waste of resources unless it helps to ensure that children in primary schools around the country learn how to read. The ASER 2006 data provides a clear idea of the magnitude of the problem. Hopefully this discussion paper will contribute to the debate over how, when, where and by whom it should be resolved.

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THE
TEACHING OF READING
IN OUR
PRIMARY SCHOOLS

SOME CRITICAL ISSUES

The state-wise ASER 2006 data on reading ability at Std. III level poses certain questions related to the evaluation of reading, as also to implications of the data for educational policy and practice.

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Linguistic Considerations in Evaluation

- Should our understanding of "grade-appropriate reading skills" be uniform across all Indian languages? The comparative complexity, or simplicity, within the structures of our different languages could be a factor that might significantly influence the pace of reading acquisition, especially by young first-generation learners. Another factor is the script and writing system. Is the orthography of one language easier to decode than another? These are not just arcane considerations – they impinge on our expectation of reading attainment in a particular language at a given stage of primary education, and consequently on the decisions related to the design of testing instruments for different levels in different languages. Research in applied linguistics needs to be initiated to inform these specific educational issues.

- A more commonly understood linguistic point is that learning to read in the standard regional language – the school language – is far more difficult for children who do not speak it when they enter Std. I. As we know, this applies not only to all children from tribal communities, but also to those who speak caste-based variations of the dominant regional language. ASER could give us a more nuanced, disaggregated understanding of reading attainment across different learner-profiles, by broadening the survey to include data on family background, and especially children's home language.

Pedagogical Issues

Creating a sense of national urgency to improve children's literacy learning has been a significant outcome of ASER. This in turn has led to a number of pedagogical solutions in a 'campaign-mode' that have demonstrated 'success' in getting non-readers to read fluently within incredibly short spans of time. In view of the interest expressed to upscale such approaches in the education system, it would be worth re-visiting some seminal but insufficiently-debated issues related to the teaching of reading in our primary schools:

1. Where school language is not the mother-tongue

There are huge numbers of school entrants for whom the school language contains a linguistic base that is syntactically, phonetically and semantically distinct from their first language. How can a 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogy for accelerated reading work equally well for these children? The methodologies adopted appear to ignore the fact that a large proportion of teachers would actually need to understand the 'why' of the dictum 'Oracy before Literacy', and gain a good grounding in second language pedagogy to teach reading in the school language to children from tribal and SC/OBC backgrounds. Whereas conversation skills are gained quite quickly when a dialect-speaking child is immersed in the school language, our system mistakes this for language ability comparable to that of the child for whom the medium of instruction is the mother-tongue. However, there is research evidence from other countries indicating that about 5 years are required for the former to attain grade norms in reading and writing for academic work.

2. Where school language is the mother-tongue

According to the available information on some of the recent projects aimed at time-bound improvements in reading levels, the instructional objectives for Stds. I - IV progress in a fixed sequence from alphabet knowledge to words, words to sentences, and thereafter to simple paragraphs. To evaluate the effectiveness of this approach before upscaling, what we need is more information on the actual levels of reading comprehension, literal and inferential, that have been achieved by Std. IV in these projects. What is the linguistic level of the texts these "successful" Std. IV students are able to read fluently and with meaning? We need to analyse the texts in terms of their level of vocabulary, sentence structure and other language elements. If they are below levels we should expect for literacy in the mother tongue for 10 year olds, then the exclusively 'bottom-up' model of reading adopted – alphabet, then words, then sentences – is called into question.

The research evidence of longer-term benefits of this model for developing reading comprehension is, in fact, weak. While improvement of literacy levels is a significant goal of educational reform, few in our primary educational establishment have asked "What kinds of literacy, and for what purposes?" By the end of the primary stage, children must move beyond literal, surface-level comprehension of text to reading that involves relating text to their own experience and prior knowledge, that demands the activation of schemata for a deeper level of cognitive processing which we refer to as 'critical literacy'.

There is no doubt that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-sound associations helps children to acquire word recognition and decoding skills, which in turn can result in comprehension of short, simple texts. But the assumption that this is sufficient for higher levels of reading comprehension to follow automatically thereafter, is seriously flawed. For research in children's literacy acquisition strongly indicates that it is right from the outset of learning to read that learners need to be immersed in the broad range of language experiences and reading strategies that provide the solid foundation on which critical literacy - or 'reading to learn' - ultimately depends.

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ASSESSMENT OF 'READING FOR UNDERSTANDING'

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The ASER 2006 discussion paper points out that there are no comparable national level surveys which could be used to validate ASER results. This is an important point that we need to look at collectively.

Reading is also not a unitary phenomenon, and hence cannot appropriately be measured by a single instrument. A national level effort needs to be made to develop tests that can measure accurately the complex cognitive act of reading. Test batteries could be constructed involving inputs from educational and experimental psychologists, language researchers, neuro-psychologists, cognitive scientists and measurement experts.

While measuring reading ability, parameters like print decoding, letter and word recognition are overt and can be easily observed. Many of the parameters that influence reading ability are much subtler and these cannot be directly observed. (For example, comprehension cannot be directly observed, rather the products of the process of comprehending are observed, and an inference is made about the nature of the processes and the quality of the comprehension). ASER 2006 has made a welcome beginning to understand the whole issue of "reading for understanding" and to see how children summarize what they read in the text.
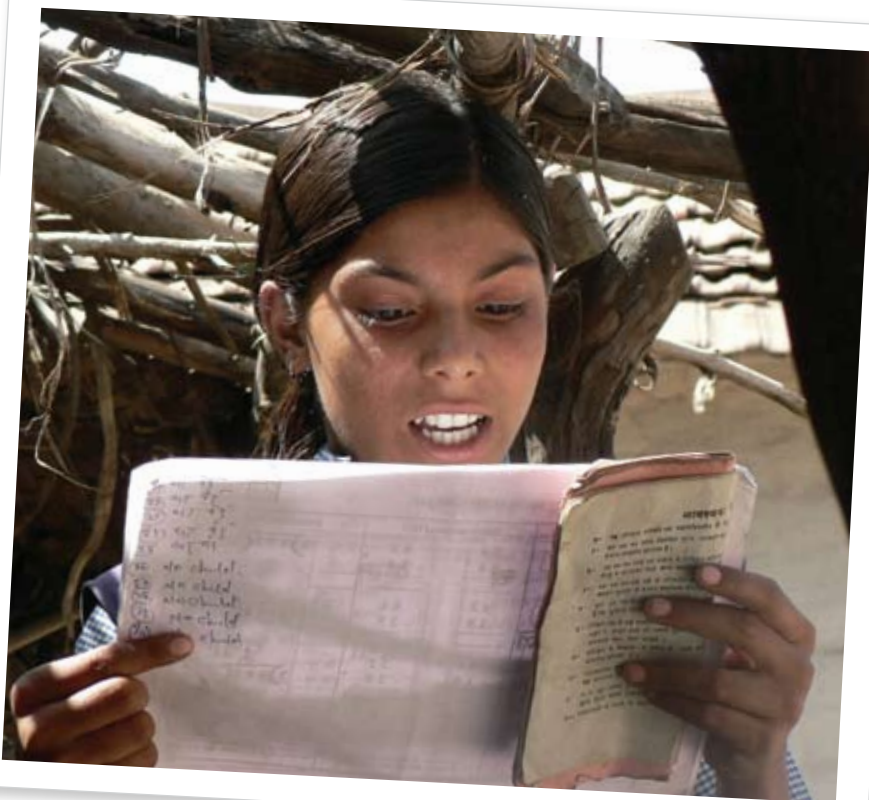
Skilled reading is dependent on being able to link sounds to script symbols, to identify letters and know meanings of words rapidly and accurately. Word meanings are then used to construct interpretations of larger text segments such as clauses and paragraphs. Further text comprehension and learning from text involves several levels of cognitive processing. At the lowest level we extract the surface meaning of the text we are reading. At a higher level we develop the ability to make inferences about the content of the text. And at a yet higher level we develop the ability to recognize "big ideas" in the text.

Sometimes the different sub-skills of reading can be useful for the purpose of measuring reading levels:

- phenomic awareness
- phonics and decoding
- fluency
- vocabulary
- comprehension (recalling stated facts, understanding, analysis and appreciation)
- higher order thinking

Processes

Focus could be made on using different techniques that assess reading ability, for example, the Sentence Verification Technique (SVT). SVT involves administration of narrative and descriptive passages to students, after which reading ability is judged based on the ability of the student to recognize the sentences presented. This is based on the assumption that when a text is read and understood, it is represented in memory in a form that preserves the meaning of the text and not necessarily the exact wording.

Technology

Use of technology can also be considered. For example, computer based text. This will enable video and audio recording of student responses and the data can then be explored by experts for analysis. At a micro level, computer based tests will also enable the capturing of other parameters like speed of responses, time taken to read, etc. This will also enable reducing evaluator error to a large extent in the field.

While measuring reading ability, parameters like print decoding, letter and word recognition are overt and can be easily observed.
Many of the parameters that influence reading ability are much subtler and these cannot be directly observed.

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SOME METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS IN MEASURING READING COMPREHENSION

In the leading piece of this issue of the ASER discussion series and under the topic of measurement methodology, Suman Bhattacharjea asked the most basic question one can put to a test like ASER: "Do the testing instruments provide an adequate measure of children's reading ability?"

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If construct validity is the extent to which evidence and theory support the test-based decisions and inferences made about groups and individuals, then Suman's question about the adequacy of ASER for measuring children's reading ability is a question about the construct validity of ASER reading.

First, it is tempting to come at the question from the perspective of those who support teaching and testing more advanced skills along the continuum of reading ability. And in some sense, the inclusion of simple comprehension questions on this year's ASER tests is an acknowledgment that the identification of alphabets and the reading aloud of words, sentences and stories might not be enough to encompass today's minimal expectations of the components of reading ability. Failure to fully capture the intended construct is known in the validity literature as construct under-representation. It is what leads us to frame the construct validity question as one of "adequacy."

To what extent is there construct under-representation in ASER, even after the inclusion of the comprehension questions? When one takes a broad view of the goals and structure of the testing effort, my conclusion is "not much."

In ASER, children are being tested on the same construct in Stds. I through VIII. The challenge for ASER given this structure and its goal is to find the common denominator of reading ability that can be assessed across all of these levels. The response to that challenge is to assess what makes children decodes simple texts and display simple forms of comprehension of these.

The ASER 2006 report displays the percent of Level II readers who can answer at least one comprehension question, and the percent answering two out of two comprehension questions, for Stds. III through VIII. These percentages are high (with cross-Standard averages of almost 96 for the first and 90 for the second), and rise monotonically with Standard. These results tell us, first, that when Indian children show fluency on simple texts, the chances are very high that they also display minimal levels of comprehension. Second, older children who meet or surpass the threshold of minimal fluency are more likely to comprehend.

When the data is disaggregated by state, these percentages vary but remain fairly high. It is insightful to compare two states – Tripura and Manipur. Selecting a Standard in the middle of the sequence (V) for purposes of comparison, the percent of Level II readers who can answer at least one question correctly is 88 in Manipur and a full 100 in Tripura. The intended interpretation is that, of the 31 and 48 percent of students who are classified as Level II readers by the core ASER in Manipur and Tripura, respectively, 88 out of 100 in the first state and all of those in the second state display this minimal level of comprehension.

What other factors might explain these results?

Although a positive step, the inclusion of comprehension questions for Stds. III and above, beyond what I have called the core of ASER, raises some methodological points that should be attended to in order to rule out factors that may confound intended interpretations, especially in light of the data in the 2006 report.

First, there is the issue of the equivalence of the questions. Like the core of ASER, the comprehension questions are constructed in a standardized way so as to minimize the sort of variation that can lead to differences in what's being assessed, or differences in difficulty. Could there have been unintended differences in difficulty in the comprehension papers for Tripura and Manipur? Unless these were controlled for by design, this remains an empirical question.

Second, the comprehension question rubrics for ASER are generic and holistic – they do not provide an answer key for each question nor a listing of all potential creditworthy responses. This in itself is not a problem – in fact, it is appropriate for a test of this nature to leave it to the examiner to judge whether the child conveyed "most of the main point". But in the absence of an independent judgment, even for a small fraction of the responses for each item (perhaps in a pretest setting), it is difficult to know whether particular comprehension questions are unusually susceptible to vagaries of judgment.

Third, does the design of responses to raters or markers make sense for the comprehension questions in ASER reading? In other words, can we say that, for the purpose of making judgments on comprehension, those administering tests to Std. V children in Tripura are interchangeable with those administering them in Manipur?

As ASER matures and expands as a testing programme, especially as it expands to measure beyond the core of reading, it will be important for its designers to attend to new methodological challenges.

In light of the high percentages of Level II readers who can answer the simple comprehension questions, it will not be long before we return to the fundamental question of construct validity and someone asks, "Does the comprehension section of ASER adequately measure children's reading comprehension?" I would take that question as a challenge to keep up with the children.
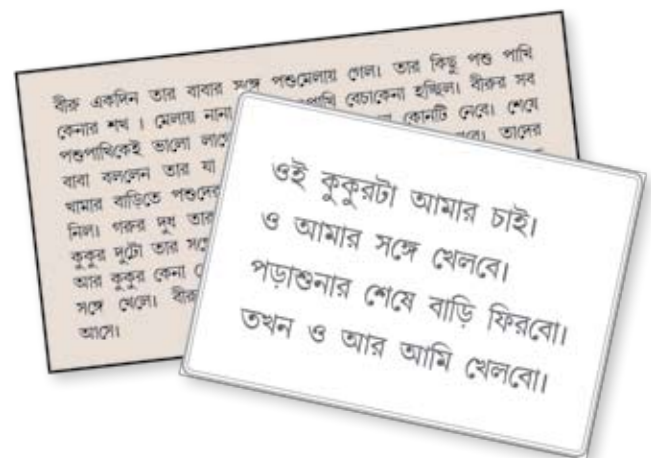
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ASSESSING READING SKILLS AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL-

IS IT COMPREHENSIVE ENOUGH?

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In Std. I, almost half of all children are unable to read alphabets.

In Std. II, almost half of all children are unable to read words.

In Std. III, almost half of all children are unable to read Std. I level text.

In Std. V, almost half of all children are unable to read Std. II level text.

- ASER 2006

As we take up testing of the child at the primary level, have we considered that language teaching-learning and its assessment should really be an upward filtration of the processes followed at the pre-school level? As we assess the reading skills of the child at the primary level, have we taken into account the socio-emotional readiness of the child to react to and adjust to a testing atmosphere that may be quite intimidating? Have we considered the impact of factors like the home environment of the child; the community interface; systemic readiness and support; and teacher performance as determinants of the child's capabilities? The reading assessment presented by ASER is a result of all the above factors - the onus of the poor results is on account of ALL these factors and not only on the child!

Language is not only a means of communication but also the reality around the child that depicts and situates her identity. In India, which is multi-cultural and multi-lingual, it is important that any assessment of language skills provides the mother tongue of the child, be it a dialect or otherwise, sufficient space and the respect that it deserves. It is important

to foster the intuitive faculty of the child for language acquisition rather than fetter her within artificially created boundaries of a prescriptively rule-governed, grammar-based reading system and a strict adherence to the structured competencies that she is expected to acquire at a particular stage of primary education. The inherent abilities of the child to construct her own paradigm of language need to be respected and recognized. Assessment of reading skills ideally ought to done in authentic communicative situations. Often language skills have been treated as discrete and mutually independent faculties. It is important to recognize that they are organically interconnected and need to be treated as such. While a child is speaking, she is also listening and while she is reading or writing, she is also cogitating and comprehending.

Some international experiments on assessment:

There have been some international experiments that have assessed learning at the primary level in its most comprehensive and wide dimensions. They looked at a wider range of educational outcomes that measured the student's motivation to learn, their beliefs about themselves and their learning strategies. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) considered learning disparities between gender and socioeconomic groups, providing insights into factors that influence the development of knowledge and skills at home and at school and what implications these factors have for policy development. The innovative 'literacy' concept that it propounded was concerned with the capacity of students to apply knowledge and skills in key curricular areas to analyse, reason and communicate effectively as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of situations.

The IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) defined reading as the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/ or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers, and for enjoyment.

This view of reading reflects numerous theories of reading literacy as a constructive and interactive process. Successful readers have positive attitudes toward reading, and read both for recreation and to acquire information. Meaning is constructed in the interaction between reader and text in the context of a particular reading experience. The reader brings a repertoire of skills, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and background knowledge. The context of the reading situation is significant in promoting engagement and motivation to read, and often places specific demands on the reader, which need to be kept in mind during assessment. PIRLS focuses on three aspects of reading literacy:

- processes of comprehension;
- purposes for reading; and
- reading behaviours and attitudes.

The UNESCO Latin American Laboratory for Evaluation of Quality of Education, the Latin Lab developed a study to assess Mathematics and Languages and associated factors at the primary level. It suggested that it was not enough to determine student achievement levels if it was not accompanied by associated variables. These analyses helped shape policy for the improvement of educational quality and equity. The Latin American Lab experiment showed that variation in achievement levels was dependent on the following factors:

- residence of students
- type of school administration (public or private)
- equality in social and cultural characteristics of the students
- exposure to similar pedagogical practices
- existence of an environment that fosters respect and harmonious relationships between students
- valuing heterogeneity among students
- ensuring parents' involvement in the school community
- providing schools with materials and libraries of sufficient quality and quantity.

Large independent assessment studies like ASER revealing low reading levels of students are a pointer to the fact that the malaise is a lot deeper- it needs to be set right through larger engagement of all players in the education system. It would then usher in appropriate policy changes to facilitate enhanced reading skills in children.

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RTI'S INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY GRADE READING (EGR)

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RTI is a university-affiliated, non-profit research institute based in North Carolina, USA. Over the past two years we have become interested in exactly the same phenomena as Pratham: the fact that many children in school cannot read. This is not necessarily because of some fixation with reading as the only thing that matters, but because we think reading is, first and foremost, a fairly tractable bellwether for education quality—if you show that reading can be improved through a cycle of measurement, public awareness, and remediation then you can probably do the same with other forms of knowledge— and second, it is indeed the pedagogical cornerstone of education. Our interest is international rather than specific to India, though we have benefited from, and are impressed by India's (specifically Pratham's) innovations and energy in this area. In this note we relate some of our efforts thus far, and our ambitions for the future.

Our efforts (similar to those of Pratham's) can be classified in three areas: a) measurement, b) public awareness or policy dialogue, and c) remediation/improvement. We have not proceeded sequentially with these, but are interested in all aspects at the same time, and are continuing to improve our approach to all three. One big difference between our approach and Pratham's is of course the scale: what Pratham has done absolutely dwarfs anything we have even tried.

In Peru, under a contract Crouch had with the World Bank, we took the simple approach of testing some 250 children in some 22 schools. While this is not a very scientific sample, the results are not bad in terms of statistical reliability. We used a reading fluency approach, rather than a "can read paragraphs" or "can only read words" approach (the way Pratham has done thus far), where we timed the children's reading. A good benchmark for Latin America (Spanish is a very simple language, Latin America is middle-income) is about 60 correct-words-per-minute by the end of Std . II. Children in Spain achieve this by the end of Std. I. We found that amongst the poorest half of the Peruvian population, 35% of second-graders cannot read at all and the average reading fluency was a discouraging 29 words per minute.

On that basis we carried out, supporting the World Bank, a process of intense policy dialogue, where the results were shared explicitly with politicians who were campaigning for the 2006 elections. The winning politician, Alan García, made reading fluency a keystone of his approach, and ordered that all children be tested. However, the state bureaucracy has balked at testing reading fluency, preferring to use methods which they deem more sophisticated and which aim directly at measuring comprehension. An interesting debate has ensued. Furthermore, it is unclear whether remediation will take the simpler approaches we have recommended, based on more direct and structured instruction, as opposed to what are purportedly more holistic approaches (but which, the evidence seems to suggest, are not yielding results). The debate continues. We were successful in attracting the attention of policymakers, but developing a common cause with the bureaucracy is elusive.

USAID has provided us with a contract to hone the methodologies involved in developing rigorous but simple measures of early-grade reading. As part of that, we held a seminar in Washington, DC, in late November 2006, to which practitioners (including Pratham) and cutting-edge researchers were invited, the idea being to test the scientific validity of the simpler methods. Our draft approach, reflecting the suggestions of experts, recommends using a few simple measures: timed (one-minute) recognition of randomised letters, randomised familiar words, randomised non-words, fluency and simple comprehension of connected text, and ability to segment phonemes (i.e., to say that "hat" sounds h, a, t, sounding out the letters). This approach will be tested in Nicaragua, in Spanish later this year.

The World Bank is supporting a pilot of some of the work we have started with USAID for two other main "colonial" languages, French and English, and an African language, Wolof. Activities are underway in Senegal and The Gambia, beginning with training for Ministry staff in applying the early-grade reading instrument and analyzing the results from 40 schools in each country. Preliminary results indicate low levels of reading: almost half of first grade students cannot identify a single letter of the alphabet, while average reading speeds of third grade students are around 35 words per minute.

South Africa, of its own initiative and accord, and in collaboration with RTI, is using similar methods to attack the problem of lack of reading. They plan to test later in 2007. Finally, RTI is also collaborating with the Aga Khan Foundation and its partners in Kenya. We plan to test in English and Kiswahili.

All of this to say that we are excited to be a part of, and perhaps a catalyst for, simple measures and approaches for improving early reading. While our endeavors are not yet on the scale of Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report, their efforts have inspired us to achieve more through simple approaches.

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CYCLE
OF SUCCESS

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Regardless of the school or country, when children's literacy assessment scores are low and students are consistently not meeting reading "standards", there is a tendency to point a blaming finger at the teachers.

While teachers need to be held accountable for the literacy learning of their students, they also need to be the recipients of effective professional development in the area of literacy pedagogy. Student needs and achievement appear to be the focus of reports, statistics and policies related to literacy, worldwide. While this focus is obviously critical, it represents only half the need. To advance literacy worldwide, the needs of teachers cannot be disregarded or left to chance.

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future shared that expertise in teaching was the single most important fact in increasing U.S. students' academic success. While this report is over ten years old, its content is still very applicable today in the U.S. and around the world. It is rarely a question of teachers not caring enough to teach in the most effective way, but rather it is most often an issue of a lack of knowledge, skill, and training necessary to meet the increasingly diverse literacy needs of their students. Professional development and a 'guide by the side' approach for teachers would greatly enhance the cycle of literacy success.

Significant growth in literacy also depends on being skilled in using assessment data to inform and drive instruction. Effective professional development can support teachers in creating assessment plans and rubrics, appropriately utilizing required assessment results, modifying instruction based on assessments, and actively involving students in the entire assessment process. Many states (USA) utilize four types of reading assessments for both primary and secondary students: screening, progress monitoring, diagnostic and outcome. Within these four broad areas, selection of the specific instruments is often left to the teacher, school or district, depending on the school's needs. These four areas form an effective pattern for assessment and this assessment enhances improvements in literacy.

A common concern voiced by many teachers around the world is how to reach and teach struggling readers before they give up or drop out. In order to avoid the snowball effect where struggling primary students quickly roll into frustrated secondary students, all students need to be explicitly taught the knowledge and skills of strategic reading at an early age. This entails teaching students how and when to use a wide range of comprehension strategies. Providing guided instruction and practice to all students beginning in the primary grades (and continuing through secondary school) both supports reading independence and helps students to learn to use the information that their secondary content teachers are so passionate about. In addition, struggling students must be provided with instruction in decoding skills, particularly multi-syllabic words, in order for there to be growth and progress in literacy learning.

Teachers are at the core of learning, and they too must be adequately prepared in order to teach effectively. Teachers, regardless of their hometown or home country, know there is a critical relationship between what they know and are able to do and how and what their students learn. Commercial reading programs can be very effective, but a long-term cycle of success will not be established unless the teachers are effectively trained and supported. Also a mechanism for continued follow-up and mentoring is very important for sustainable professional development for teachers.

It is rarely a question of teachers not caring enough to teach in the most effective way, but rather it is most often an issue of a lack of knowledge, skill, and training necessary to meet the increasingly diverse literacy needs of their students.

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FROM SILENCE TO ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

The Learning Guarantee Programme is an assessment-led reform process focusing on creating a voluntary spirit of accountability towards learning by schools and the education system.

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It commenced in Madhya Pradesh in August 2004 in the districts of Datia and Vidisha. The programme is designed to bring about change in the present examination system by testing the attainment of competencies by children in a child-friendly environment and providing detailed feedback to each school on the performance of their students.

Under the mentorship of Dr A.K. Jalaluddin, the Government of Madhya Pradesh and Azim Premji Foundation conceived of an Action Research Programme as providing an example of the possibilities in a classroom. It was thought necessary to use this space to experiment for the kind of transformation in classroom processes that needed to be achieved. The learning from such experiments could feed into textbook development, curriculum and training.

The underlying assumption was that change should start from "as is where is" i.e. implement the current curricular objectives through methods that were realistic for the teacher. The concept visualized that as volunteers and teachers in the chosen schools practiced the new pedagogical approach they would see joyful, activity-based learning, regular attendance, and accelerated learning. They would also see the practical benefits of group work, peer learning and independent learning.

Fifteen schools were selected in the districts of Vidisha and Datia. The experiment was time-bound and focused on the learning of language and mathematics only. The experiment was limited to Stds. I, II, III and IV. Teaching learning material was prepared and processes and activities were planned for every day of the programme. Fifteen volunteers were selected, trained and placed in the schools, where they spent one hour

every day with each class. Orientations were conducted for teachers and educational functionaries on the concept and pedagogy of the programme.

The programme viewed the development of language as the key to learning – this includes understanding and expression through listening, speaking, stories, songs, poetry, drama, music, games, artwork, craft, reading and writing. Language was seen as meaning making and not only as a means of communication. The whole idea was to help children make sense out of their own experience and to "unlock" their imagination – to express themselves as freely as possible. When the programme was launched, most children were found to be quiet, stiff and unwilling to draw attention to themselves by participating in any activities. By the end of the programme, the classroom was alive with children playing with words in every possible way. Reading and writing did not become disconnected entities in themselves – they were part of the development of language as a whole.

Children can and do learn from one another. Children forming groups on their own, working with each other and using each others' strengths as a resource were not only encouraged but were deliberately built into the classroom process. A code of conduct was evolved (listening while others spoke and sorting out quarrels without physically fighting etc.) along with some basic group formation principles (gender balance, multiple levels of learning etc.).

Building on the prior knowledge of the children and using games, stories and activities that live in their context was essential if the children were to connect to the programme. It was also an essential part of the principle of learning with meaning. The local dialect was used extensively by the volunteer to ensure the children's comfort level in the classroom. This also helped make the transition to the formal medium of instruction less traumatic and more meaningful.

Varied teaching learning material was used to build and sustain children's interest and to provide a stimulating environment for learning. The whole idea of providing varied sensory experience for children was reflected in the books, charts, pocket boards, pictures, beads, number cards etc. and the activities that were planned. Workbooks provided children the chance to work at their own pace, to help and seek help from others, to practice skills and to "own and show" their work. The workbook also becomes an invaluable tool of assessment for the teacher.

So what did an ARP classroom look like? It was a general principle that a silent classroom is not necessarily a learning classroom. Noise in the classroom could be very, very healthy! The children sat in groups, moved around the room freely, collected material that they needed, helped each other and listened to explanations when required. They made a lot of choices and "owned" the classroom space.

Functionaries of the State government, including Dr. R. P. Singh and Ms. Sudha Mishra from the Rajya Shiksha Kendra, were involved with the creation of teaching learning material and the orientation for teachers. The orientation for teachers was conducted by resource people from the State who were involved in the programme from the start.

Sharing and reflection within the ARP team was built into the programme. After the initial orientation for the volunteers, there were weekly visits to every school by the coordinators along with individual and group meetings with the volunteers. Fortnightly reviews were held on progress and problems with the volunteers sharing their experiences with each other and the coordinators.

The results of the quantitative assessment have shown a significant jump in basic language competency among children. For example, the baseline indicated that 30% of children in Std. IV were unable to even identify letters. Very few could read simple words or sentences. The end line results showed 97% of children able to fully identify letters and their sounds and able to use those letters in constructing words and sentences. 93% of children were able to read words without matras and 87% were able to read words with matras. The qualitative reports are rich with examples and stories of children's interaction with each other and the volunteer. The classroom had stopped being a place of regimentation and restriction – this was the highlight of the entire programme.

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PADIPPUM INIKKUM
A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Divya is a 9 year old girl in Periyakuppam village in Kanchipuram district in Tamil Nadu. As we step into her school, she runs up and leads us into the classroom. The walls are filled with colourful story posters. Curious children crowd around the teacher's desk.

Divya shows us the new words she has written on the board that day. "She is now even making her own word puzzles" says teacher Meenakshi quietly. Divya comes from a very poor fishing family and lives with her mother and aunt. Till two months ago, Divya was a quiet child who could not even identify a single alphabet. Now she has started reading and writing words. For her teacher, this has been enough reason to diligently conduct daily reading classes for all the children who cannot read.

Officially, this is part of the Padippum Inikkum reading programme launched by the SSA in partnership with AID-India. For teacher Meenakshi, neither the programme definition nor its time frame is very significant. But she has a clear goal now – getting all children in her class to read fluently.

ASER 2005 showed that only 50% children in Tamil Nadu could read fluently. This was seen as a huge surprise. Although Tamil Nadu has good school infrastructure and enrollment rate, learning quality is still a major problem.

Why are so many children unable to read even after attending school regularly? Most of these children are first generation learners who need individual attention. Also, apart from the textbook, there are just no reading materials available – and hence no motivation to read.

Solving the problem at a systemic level

Foremost, reading must be defined as a goal and evaluated as a skill – not as consolidated marks in the examination. Secondly, a simple yet strong methodology is needed. In Padippum Inikkum teachers conducted level specific group activities daily with a variety of visual materials – colorful

story posters, word and story cards. Just 58% children in Std. V were reading in October 2006. By March 2007, 8,000 teachers in five districts in Tamil Nadu were able to get 86% children to read.

But to ensure a reliable systemic solution, just a good pedagogy idea is not enough. Padippum Inikkum provided many valuable lessons in dealing with systemic change:

a. Integrated approach: Many large-scale attempts focus on specific interventions and do not integrate. Material supply programs do not look at training and vice versa. All parts of a system have to work together to ensure impact.

b. Evaluation: The first step towards solving a problem is accepting that the problem exists. There is no hope of improvement if teachers are afraid of submitting data that so many children in their school cannot read. In Padippum Inikkum, teachers were reassured that they would not be held responsible for the initial reading status of their class. In any remedial programme, evaluation strategies need to be communicated well at all levels.

Activity evaluation: Teachers are the implementers – they do what has been planned. Therefore, teachers should be evaluated on activities that are under their control – like assessing children's reading levels accurately and conducting regular reading classes.

Result evaluation: "How many children learnt to read at the end of the programme?" This question provides the most important feedback for programme planners. It helps refine programme definition, time frame, materials and training methodology.

c. Making things work: Always tracking what is needed, and when it is needed. Delays and gaps often defeat the purpose of the activity. Reading materials must be available on the day of the training. Library story cards must be supplied at the appropriate time. Looking for what could go wrong and correcting it needs constant focus.

d. Different strategies for different teachers: One size does not fit all. Motivated and innovative teachers could be organized into a Teachers' Innovation Network. Teachers who try a new idea only if it is "not too much trouble" need more field level training. With cynical and apathetic teachers, creating peer pressure pushes them to deliver.

Community Initiatives

Various community initiatives are needed for large-scale change:

1. Mobilizing the community – making the problem visible, building understanding of the problem.

2. Building consensus – demonstrating solutions by running village libraries and support classes

3. Improving schools – helping teachers, running summer camps, taking an interest in what children learn.

4. Pressurizing the system – demanding regular teacher attendance, setting minimum quality requirements, and monitoring progress of schools.

ASER does several of these things at once. It creates large-scale public motivation to understand and solve the problem. Through public participation it pressurizes the school system to improve. Many more ideas and initiatives will be required to do all that it takes to get every child to read fluently. We cannot bank on one single strategy or programme because this is something that is too important to leave to chance.

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LEARNINGS FROM
ASER
AND
NAI DISHA
IN IMPROVING DELIVERY
OF SERVICES IN EDUCATION

The Uttar Pradesh Government has been focusing its effort and energy towards ensuring that primary schooling facilities are available to all and that all children are enrolled in schools.

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A number of schemes and programmes have been launched by the Government. As part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan budgets have been sanctioned / made available and attempts have been made to ensure that adequate infrastructure is in place.

The results of the efforts to increase school enrollments have been encouraging. As per ASER 2006 and other sources approximately 94-95 % of all children in the state are already enrolled in schools. This figure in itself is not a small feat for a large state like Uttar Pradesh. The need of the hour is (and the Government is taking a number of steps in this regard) to carry the momentum forward and expand the focus beyond just the percentage of enrollments. In this regard, students in Std. I and II have been provided workbooks last year. This year the plan is to provide them to all children.

In the above mentioned context the ASER 2006 Uttar Pradesh serves as an important tool (later in this article, I will suggest a couple of points to further strengthen the survey) as it helps to translate a qualitative understanding of the state of education into statistical figures that are easy for everyone to understand. This year's ASER is an improvement over ASER 2005 as it has included a survey of mother's literacy, which is an important factor in determining literacy levels of children.

It has also updated and improved its testing tools to include a test of comprehension in higher level children.

Looking at the reading level figures for ASER 2006, UP (as per the survey findings half the children in Stds. I and II recognize alphabets in Government schools and half the children studying in Stds. III to V can read simple Hindi paragraphs) one can see that there is scope for improvement. The Government and its partners have already started working towards addressing this issue and a program called Nai Disha is currently being undertaken in 20 districts of Uttar Pradesh. The aim of the program is to improve the learning levels of the children and build capacity for training of teachers in the districts.

Overall, based on feedback from the districts and the ASER report, three basic steps can be identified that may have a significant impact on the quality of education and learning levels in the State. These are:

a. Greater community and civil society participation in the education process and partnerships with the Government. The Government welcomes civil society partnerships in implementing the various education linked programs. ASER itself is an important step in civil society participation. This year, the UP Government has partnered with over 200 organisations in implementing its programmes, whereas in the past there were linkages with only a few organisations. The results have been positive.

b. Holistic approach towards creating a learning environment in a community and not just focus on an individual child. Learning does not take place only in the school and it is vital to understand the importance of educating mothers. The learning levels of children whose mothers are educated are bound to increase.

c. Making sure that good quality and appropriate teaching-learning materials are available to students along with teachers trained in their use. The capacity to develop teaching materials exists with education staff at the district levels and efforts need to be made to develop and tap this resource. Also in many areas maths and language workbooks have been made available to primary students and the results have been encouraging.

As I have already mentioned the ASER report provides one with indicators to judge the levels of progress in certain aspects of education. But in order to judge the overall status of education, the survey will need to incorporate questions that provide data on school dropout / retention rates, absenteeism etc.

Also as a number of civil society actors come together for the ASER survey it would be best if the survey and testing is undertaken by groups/oranisations not working in that specific geographical area in order to maintain the existing high standards and levels of objectivity of the survey.

As the Uttar Pradesh Government continues to work with its partners to improve the levels of education in the state, one is sure that the ASER 2007 will find that significant progress has been made in UP.

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RESEARCH USING ASER DATA

Analysis of education in India is hampered by the lack of availability of appropriate data. Despite encouraging recent improvements in the educational database, there is a real paucity of reliable data.

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A good proportion of the schools are not enumerated in official surveys such as the All India Education Survey. For instance, coverage of various categories of special schools is patchy and private schools lacking government 'recognition' are not enumerated at all. Enrolment data are also unreliable because failing publicly funded schools sometimes exaggerate their student numbers in order to justify their existence. No data is available on student attendance, as opposed to enrolment, as the former requires several visits to the same schools during the course of the school year. Moreover, national, state or district level data are not routinely collected on standardized achievement tests in primary and junior education. Even in ad hoc testing exercises where such data are collected, they are rarely linked to student, teacher and school characteristics and are thus of limited usefulness. While exam boards do have annual achievement data for secondary school level, these data are not publicly available to researchers and, in any case, are not linked to student and school characteristics.

Partly reflecting this lack of data, there is a scarcity of econometric research on educational issues in India. This author has not seen a single achievement production function study using officially collected national, state or district level standardized test score data. The few studies that exist mostly use data collected on a small scale by individual researchers. Moreover, the quality of the extant research is also low – production function studies have mostly established correlations rather than causation between student achievement and particular school and teacher inputs, though some recent studies have used randomised experiments, instrumental variable techniques and differencing approaches.

Without necessarily answering all the data needs, ASER provides the most exciting addition to education data in India for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, ASER publicly provides national data on standardized competency-based measures of learning achievement. This is a path-breaking contribution because it permits families, schools, civil society and policy makers to observe the quality of schooling based on an output based indicator that is widely valued,

rather than on inputs based indicators such as school resources, infrastructure, number of teachers and teacher characteristics which, international research suggests, are often not good measures of school quality. Secondly, ASER is the only household survey dataset on enrolled children's grade and school-type since the 1995-96 NSS round on 'Participation in Education', eleven years ago. As such, it permits a large household-sample based examination of important school participation indicators such as grade for age, grade repetition rates, transition rates from primary to middle school and the extent of utilisation of private schooling at the primary and middle levels of education. Much has changed in education in the past eleven years. For example, there has been a large-scale spread of private schooling in India and it is simply not possible to get an idea of the true size of the private school enrolment share from any other source since official statistics do not cover the so-called 'unrecognised' schools which are a major part of the private school sector. The ASER sample size is large enough to permit reliable inferences, and it is 3 to 10 times larger than in other national household surveys that have been used for analysis of education and human development issues in India.

A rich research agenda can be pursued with ASER data. As an example, one line of enquiry would utilise the unique data on mothers' cognitive skills in reading in the ASER survey. While research in India shows that mother's education matters strongly for children's schooling participation and for their school achievement, these studies are all based on very small samples and none of them have information on mothers' cognitive skills. Several questions are addressable with ASER data. It may be that it is not so much mothers' education as mothers' cognitive skills that matter to children's schooling outcomes and the two may not be highly correlated because of spatial variations in quality of schooling. ASER data permit asking whether it is maternal education or cognitive skills that matter, or both. Secondly, it is useful to ask whether the correlation of mother's education with child's reading achievement is larger at certain ages than at others. For example, it may be that mother's education matters to child learning much more at the early ages (say ages 6, 7 and 8) than at the older ages (say ages 14, 15 or 16). Thirdly, it is worth disentangling the effect of child's age (on reading score) from the effect of mother's education (on reading score). Child age and mother's education are likely to be strongly negatively correlated since younger children have, on average, more educated mothers (ASER shows that younger mothers are generally much better educated than older mothers).

Because of this negative correlation, the effect of child age on reading ability is likely to be under-estimated when we just present reading scores by age in descriptive tables, as in the published ASER 2006 report. Simple regression analysis can identify the separate effects of child age and mother's education on child reading score. In doing these explorations, it will be possible to see whether there are inter-state differences in these relationships, and to consider why.

A more ambitious research agenda would link ASER learning data at the district level to District level DISE/ EMIS data to obtain information on school/teacher inputs and to census and national household survey data (e.g. NSS, NCAER-2005, NFHS-2005) to obtain information on district-aggregated socioeconomic variables. This should permit cross-section analysis examining the district-level relationship of learning achievement with socioeconomic characteristics and school/teacher inputs. However, the potential of ASER goes far beyond this because it is being collected every year for 10 years. By linking ASER data with DISE/EMIS data for each year and over time, it should be possible to create a district-level (and potentially village-level) panel dataset, i.e. data on the same households and schools over time, which offers the unique potential to learn about causal relationships between school inputs and children's learning outcomes because it would allow relating change in learning achievement over time to change in school/teacher inputs over time.

The usefulness of ASER can increase further if, as in the PROBE survey, it collects data on both the supply-side of schooling i.e. on school quality indicators in the village (as it did in 2005) as well as on a wider set of demand side (household) variables, and if it can collect data on the same sample of households over time in order to furnish an individual-level panel dataset.

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FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO LEARNING

After the landmark Supreme Court judgement in 1993 in the Unnikrishnan case, it took nine long years for the government to amend the Constitution to make education a Fundamental Right.

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In that time, a whole cohort of children had moved from Std. I to beyond the age of 14 years, up to which the Fundamental Right is guaranteed under the Constitution. And our legislators are yet to introduce a bill in Parliament that will bring this right into force.

But what's equally important is that a significant percentage of the children who are in school have not acquired even basic skills after having spent a few years attending school.

The ASER data on learning levels is self explanatory - almost a third of the children in Std. IV are unable to read a simple paragraph. By this time, a child has been in school for four long years - and the child, the teacher, and most importantly, the parents, are beginning to draw some conclusions. Almost all parents, even when they are illiterate, have a reasonably good sense of whether their child is doing well in school or not. And now, if I am a subsistence farmer or an artisan, my tendency would be to say, "Look my child is not doing well in school anyway. So let me get him out of school and get him to learn life skills" - which, in this case may be working on the farm or as an apprentice artisan.

Economists would say that this parent has made a "rational choice." The other side of the argument is

also true - parents are known to invest significantly more resources on the child's education if they perceive the child to be "bright". We have all heard of parents selling off any property that they might have in order to educate their child. Rightly or wrongly, parents tend to make these assessments about whether a child is bright fairly early on - say by Std. IV or V. So if the child is seen as someone who is way behind his peer group in something as basic as reading simple sentences, then the odds are that the parent might choose to pull the child out. Of course, if the parents are above subsistence level, then they might choose to keep the child longer in school in the hope that the child might pick up at some point.

Traditional research literature put out by education-economists has drawn correlations between poverty and drop outs – that is, if the family is very poor, then the child is more likely to drop out of school. Such conclusions hide more than they reveal. Not enough rigorous and systematic research has been done in India on the correlation between non-learning and dropping out. This body of work is important because this shifts the argument that some education administrators often use – "children are poor and so they drop out. What can we do?" The argument now shifts to why so many children are not learning and what needs to be done. If we are serious about the Fundamental Right to education, we must recognise that we cannot achieve it without the Fundamental Right to learning.

This acknowledgment that learning outcomes can have a significant bearing on the chances of a child's continuation is necessary. For several years now, important initiatives have been underway to improve learning outcomes, initiated in some places by enthusiastic government officials and in some other places by voluntary initiatives. The key challenge in any such effort is scalability – if an approach is not scalable, it will not fundamentally alter the learning outcomes of survey results in the next 3-5 years.

If India's economic boom begins to improve the conditions of low income families, we might actually start seeing that children tend to spend more years in school – learning or not learning at the age appropriate levels. And as ASER data has shown, the longer the child stays in school, the more likely he is to pick up basic literacy skills. But that would a terribly inefficient way of achieving basic literacy skills, and leave us extremely weak as a nation, unable to reap the benefits of the

demographic advantage that India is poised to have in the next two decades.

The draft Bill that was circulated by the Ministry of Human Resources Development in 2005 has not been introduced formally in Parliament. Some newspapers have said that the Bill was not introduced because it imposes a huge burden on the exchequer. Whatever the reasons, it is interesting to see the speed with which the Constitution 93rd amendment – popularly known as the OBC Reservation Bill – was introduced and passed in Parliament. What's even more important is the Financial Memorandum of the Bill that operationalised this 93rd Amendment said that the government would invest "… whatever it takes…" to implement the provisions of the Bill. There is no question that the government must necessarily invest in creating social and educational opportunities for citizens who have hitherto been neglected. But why is the same government thinking twice about investing in basic education, while saying that they are willing to invest any amount of money to implement the OBC Reservation Bill? Is it not obvious that the excluded classes cannot take advantage of opportunities in higher education if they are unable to complete basic education?

To put all this into the context of the Fundamental Right guaranteed under article 21A of the Constitution -- the right includes the "right to learning" and not merely the "right to sit in school".


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READING
AND
BEYOND ...

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Reading is an essential first step in a child's journey of learning. As the child travels through the education system and beyond, reading becomes increasingly sophisticated and integrally linked with deeper levels of understanding.
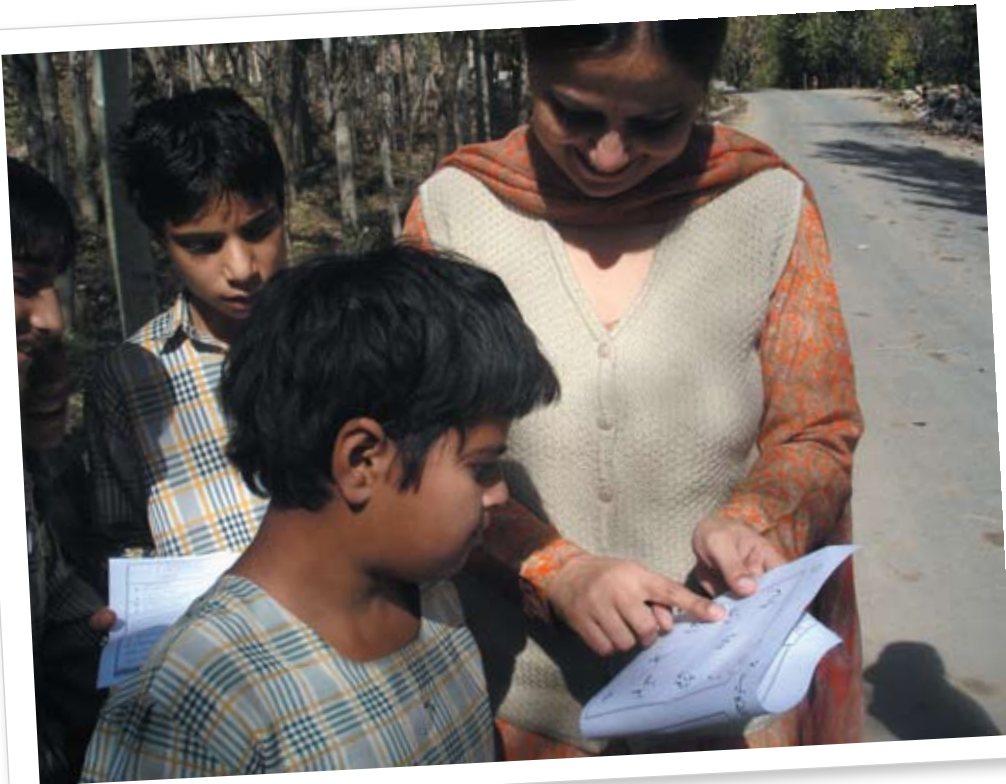
By attempting to define and measure "reading" for children across the country, ASER has a brought a sense of national urgency to this topic. As we move towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, at least in the context of India, "reading" needs substantial thought and urgent action. This issue of the ASER Discussion Series has initiated a lively debate and energetic discussion on several key dimensions of "reading". The ASER findings provide a springboard for academics, practitioners, policy-makers both in India and abroad to share evidence and experiences, opinions and perspectives, concerns and challenges.

What does it mean when we say a child can read? How can this be measured? What are the implications for practice and for policy? What have we learned so far? What are the next steps?

Whether in terms of measurement or methodology, or in terms of teaching and learning, the contributors highlight substantive issues of simplicity versus comprehensiveness, of short-run approaches versus long run impact.

Zakiya Kurrien's piece makes us think about the challenge of defining a uniform standard of "grade appropriate reading skill" across the mammoth diversity of languages and linguistic backgrounds of India's children. The Education Initiatives group write about the need for developing a range of measures to capture the complexities of the cognitive act of reading. William Lorié's write-up is a thoughtful methodological comment on ASER 2006's attempt to look further along the continuum of reading ability at comprehension or reading for understanding. Geeta Kingdon broadens the discussion by pointing to the possibility of a larger empirical research agenda using ASER data on learning.

Reflecting on recent large scale experiences of reading programs in rural areas, Balaji Sampath and Chandra Anil (Tamil Nadu), and Parthasarthi Sen Sharma (Uttar Pradesh) identify factors for strengthening and sustaining reading ability for children and more importantly, key elements for building the capacity of schools and communities to support reading. Sakil Malik and Judy Backlund bring the international perspective from the International Reading Association to highlight the need for helping teachers "reach" and "teach" struggling readers. Shabnam Sinha points to the multilayered context in which children's reading skills or deficits accumulate over time.

An interesting and unusual perspective of politics and policy is introduced into this discussion of reading by C.V. Madhukar for India and Luis Crouch and Amber Gove for Peru. Madhukar extends the Fundamental Right to education to the Fundamental Right to learning and contrasts the fate of Fundamental Right to education legislation with the speed with which the Reservation Bill was passed in the Indian parliament. Crouch and Gove describe the experience of explicitly sharing reading results with politicians campaigning for the 2006 elections in Peru.

Developing and sustaining children's ability to read is intrinsically linked the children's ability to comprehend, to understand and to analyse and interpret life and the world around them. We welcome the spirit of debate and discussion and hope that the interaction on dimensions of reading will continue. We invite responses to the articles published in this issue. Please write to us at - aser@pratham.org

Developing and sustaining children's ability to read is intrinsically linked the children's ability to comprehend, to understand and to analyse and interpret life and the world around them. We welcome the spirit of debate and discussion and hope that the interaction on dimensions of reading will continue.

Rukmini Banerji has been with Pratham for over 10 years and has worked in the core team of ASER since its inception.

INDIA RURAL

Std. I and II Reading

Statewise map showing % of children in Std. I and II who can read alphabets or more
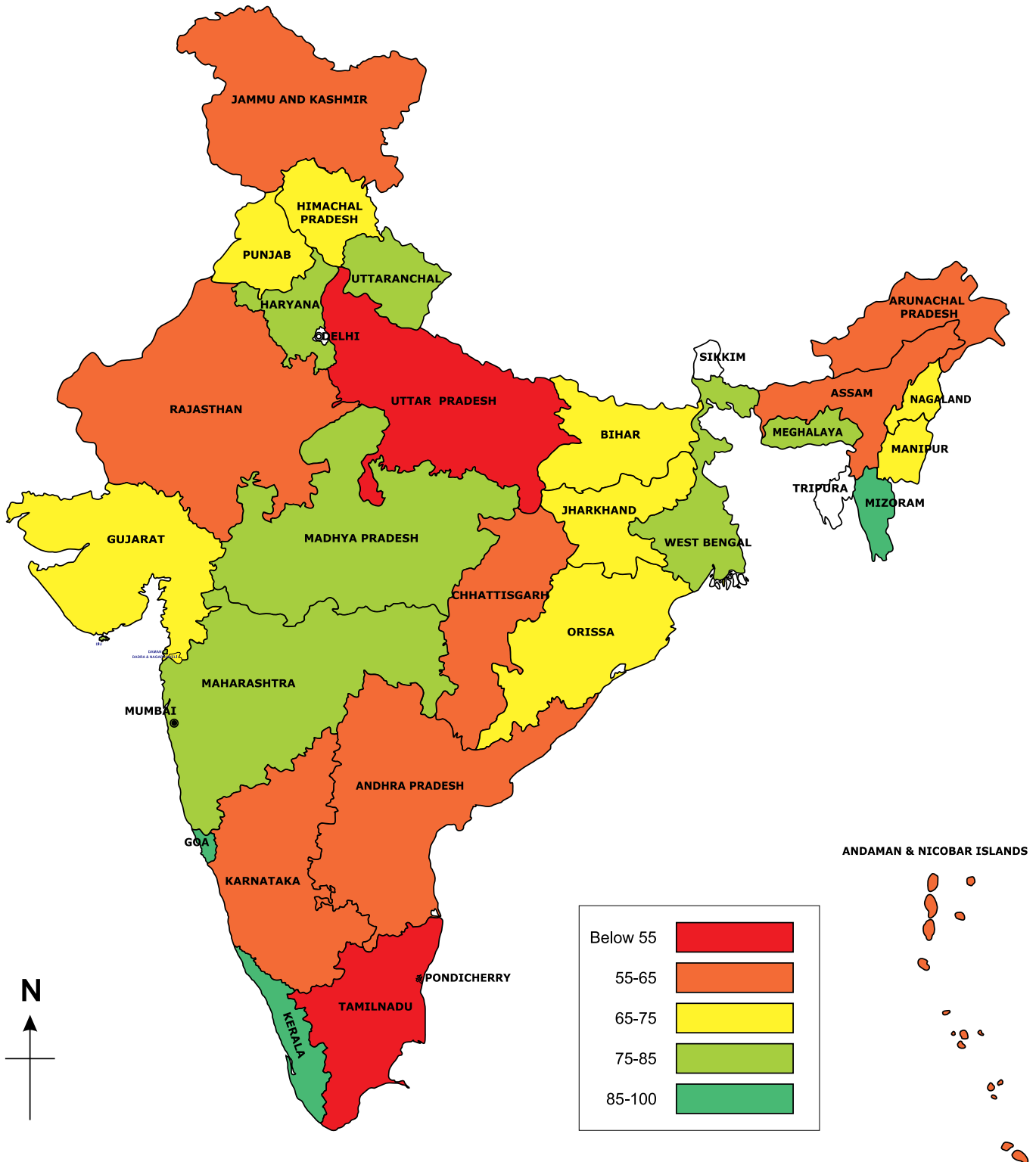

Legend:
- Below 55
- 55-65
- 65-75
- 75-85
- 85-100
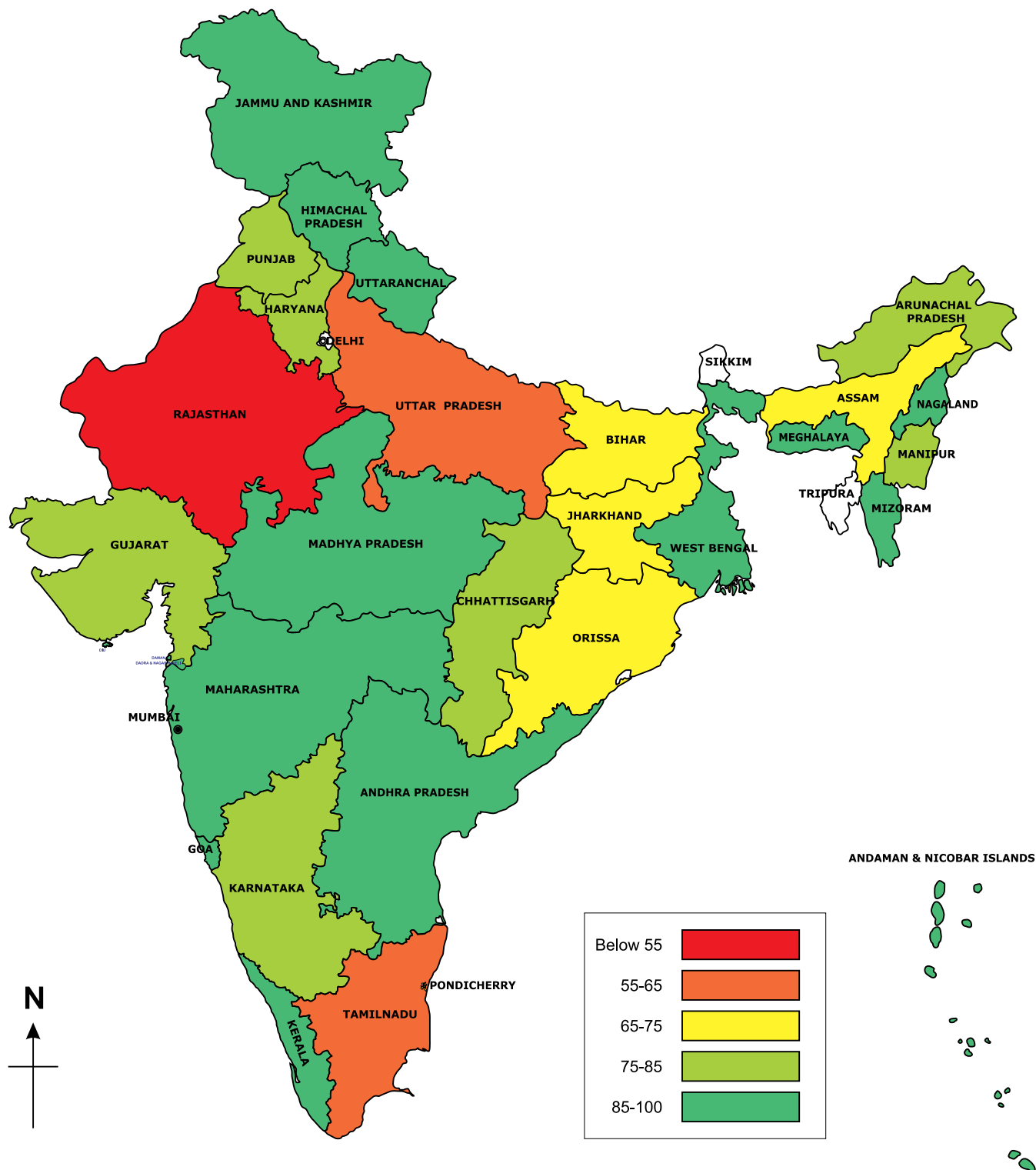
Maps may not be accurate to scale. These are mere representations.

Source: ASER (Rural) 2006

INDIA RURAL

Std. III-V Reading

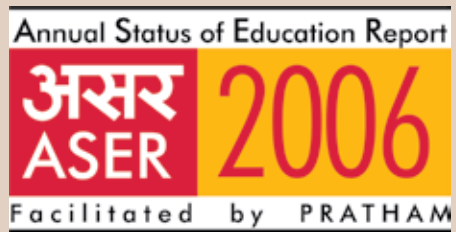Statewise map showing % of children in Std. III-V who can read Std. I text or more
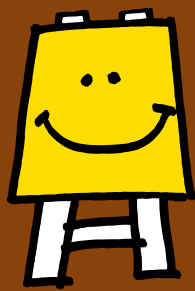
JAMMU AND KASHMIR

HIMACHAL
PRADESH

PUNJAB

UTTARANCHAL

HARYANA

DELHI

RAJASTHAN

UTTAR PRADESH

BIHAR

SIKKIM

ARUNACHAL
PRADESH

ASSAM

NAGALAND

MEGHALAYA

MANIPUR

TRIPURA

MIZORAM

GUJARAT

MADHYA PRADESH

JHARKHAND

WEST BENGAL

DELI

DAMAN
DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI

MAHARASHTRA

CHHATTISGARH

ORISSA

MUMBAI

ANDHRA PRADESH

GOA

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

KARNATAKA

N

PONDICHERRY

TAMILNADU

KERALA

Below 55	
55-65	
65-75	
75-85	
85-100	

Maps may not be accurate to scale. These are mere representations.

Source: ASER (Rural) 2006

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Notes

Annual Status of Education Report

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ASER 2006

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