

Learning gaps

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), released on Tuesday, is significant for several reasons. In looking at the age group of 14-18, the survey — to begin with — offers insights into the performance of the Right to Education Act, eight years after it made elementary education a fundamental right. The 14-year olds surveyed in the report, brought out by the NGO Pratham, are amongst the first to have benefited from the Act's provisions of free and compulsory education for those in the age group of six to 14.

There is heartening news here: Only 5.3 per cent of these teenagers are not in school. The ASER report shows that most continue to stay within the formal education system even when they are out of the Act's ambit. More than 92 per cent children, aged 15, were in school.

But that's where the good news end. In fact, with 30.2 per cent children aged 18 not receiving education, the situation gets alarming. As the report notes, "With almost 10 per cent of India's population in the age group of 14-18, these percentages translate into large numbers of youth who are not in the formal education system".

The past 11 ASER reports, which focused on 6-14 year olds, indicated parity between girls and boys on school enrollment. Such parity is more or less maintained at age 14. However, by age 18, there are 4.3 per cent more girls than boys who are not enrolled in the formal education system. The gender divide gets even more glaring with the boys outperforming girls in almost every task assigned to them and being privileged in several respects, including access to computers.

The 14-18 age bracket is very close to the incoming earning age. Seen that way, ASER 2017 highlights the challenges that have to be overcome before India can reap the benefits of being the country with the largest young population in the world. It is alarming, for example, that about 25 per cent of the youth in the age group of 14-18 cannot read a basic text fluently in their own language. Learning deficits such as this highlight the need for pedagogic tools that synchronise knowledge with lived realities.

ASER 2017 shows that though the need to increase enrollment remains pressing, the imperatives of reforming curricula and pedagogy can no longer yield second place to it. The report should go some way in addressing the complaint of policymakers that lack of data on learning outcomes prevents tweaking policies, meaningfully. The important takeaway of the report is that education should not only provide young people the skills but also the confidence to deal with the world. India's education system has some way to go before it fulfills that objective.

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