

## ASER survey: We must focus on the three 'R's

Another Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has been released, and the results don't look good: 40% of the students between the ages of 14 and 18 surveyed in rural schools across 24 states could not tell the time from the image of a clock and 46% couldn't read and understand three out of four instructions. Many (57%) couldn't do basic math, even read fluently in their own language (25%).

ASER's study included an assessment of the ability of these students to perform daily tasks (such as telling the time and counting money); common calculations (measuring length); and read and understand instructions (such as those on the sides of packs).

The gaps in learning mirror those among children in elementary school, but are far more critical. Young adults such as those surveyed are just a step away from entering the economic mainstream and their learning deficit could translate into a shortage of skilled manpower that could hurt the economy.

It isn't all bad, 53% of all 14-year olds surveyed and close to 60% of 18-year olds, can read in English, and almost 79% of these get the meaning of what they are reading. And 76% can count money.

ASER doesn't look at writing ability, but it is clear that most students in government and private schools in rural India don't fare well in two of the three 'R's of education (reading and arithmetic).

The reasons for the performance of the students in the ASER tests are known: poor infrastructure; gaps in the quality and quantity of teachers; and antiquated teaching methods that ignore the media-rich environment in which these students live.

While only 30% of the students surveyed had used the Internet in the week before the study was conducted, 86% had watched TV; 72.9% used a mobile phone; and 62.5% read a newspaper.

The students aren't lacking in aspiration, though: 60% of those surveyed want to study beyond Class XII.

Together, these ingredients add up to a recipe for frustration, possibly civil unrest.

This should be the focus of the government's efforts. Rewriting curricula (and history) to push a particular worldview can wait till we can get the basics right. And it doesn't get any more basic than the 3 'R's.

END

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