

SKILL DEFICIT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

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Like its previous editions, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018 raises several worrying questions. The report prepared by the NGO Pratham shows that poor learning outcomes remain the Achilles' heel of the country's primary and secondary education system. Only 50 per cent of students in Class V can read a Class II-level text, reveals the study that was released on Tuesday. School-going children are also struggling with basic arithmetic skills. More than 56 per cent of children enrolled in Class VIII cannot solve a three-digit by one-digit division problem correctly.

There is some consolation, though. The report card on foundational skills, though dismal, shows marginal improvement over ASER's evaluation in 2012. The proportion of students in Class VIII who can read a Class II text has increased by a little more than 3 per cent from that in 2012. The proportion of children in Class V who can do basic division has gone up from 24.9 per cent in 2012 to 27.9 per cent in 2018. A noteworthy aspect about these factoids is that government schools have been the harbinger of change. It's even more heartening that in this respect, states hitherto considered as outliers in educational accomplishment, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh for example, have not lagged behind the more advanced states like Kerala and Karnataka. The ASER report, however, issues a caveat: "Though the declining trend in learning outcomes of government schools seems to have been arrested and even reversed, it's important to remember that we are talking about foundational abilities." This note of caution is well-taken. Nevertheless, the salience of state-run or funded schools in improving learning outcomes cannot be overstated. As the ASER study itself points out, about 70 per cent of school-going children in rural India attend a government-run school.

However, the government cannot afford to look at education as business-as-usual. Some of the recent problems in the economy have raised important questions for the sector. The rural distress and clamour for quotas, for example, underline the fact that people in rural India lack the technical skills that would enable them to find a job outside the farm sector. Last year's ASER report had revealed that only "28 per cent had used the internet and 26 per cent had used computers in the last week, while 59 per cent had never used a computer and 64 per cent had never used internet". The revelations in this year's report are even more grim. For example, it points out that one out of four children in rural India leaves Class VIII without basic reading skills and over half of them cannot solve a basic division problem. It's high time that the government joins the dots between the predicaments it faces in the economy and the malaise in the educational sector.

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