

## ASER - Wallowing In The Grassroots

For someone who has rarely gone out of the city and has screen time over eight hours, I was pumped up for the ASER **Beyond Basic** survey! Ready with our survey gear, and water bottles. Pallavi - a student volunteer and I embarked to one of the village in Nanded. Unlike the city covered with concrete jungles and crowded streets, I was in awe at the villages nestling in the bosom of nature, wide and empty streets, children playing mindlessly under the shadow of banyan trees. Basked in the tranquillity of Mother Nature and green landscapes. It was a sight to behold.



Upon arrival at the village, Pallavi and I made rapport with a group of old people, who were passing their time at the bus stop and told them our purpose of visit. They guided us to the Gram Panchayat office, where we met Sarpanch and Aanganwadi Didis (women workers). Languages exhibit significant regional variations, with dialects and accents shifting every few kilometres. Thanks to Pallavi! Her dialect and local accent helped us communicate with the Sarpanch and other villagers.

A wrinkly old man, who had just gotten off the bus with a bunch of papers in his hand, spotted us leaving the Gram Panchayat office. He curiously asked us for our reason for visiting the survey. Pallavi and I went on with our speech about the ASER **Beyond Basic** survey of youth from the 14-18 age group and asked him for directions around the village. He was a former Gram Sevak and was well-versed with the village's geography.

### *Our village tour guide*

He enthusiastically gave us a detailed village tour, showing us the intersection point of different lanes and landmarks which served as a reliable guide, leading us back on course whenever we lost our way. The papers clutched in his hand were villager's light bills. As an active fellow villager, he simultaneously guided us and distributed villagers' light bills. Even though he was in his late 70s, the wrinkly old man walked faster, leaving us gasping for air.

After the detailed tour, we drew a map of the village- a crucial and second most important part of the survey. While mapping, I observed many of the villagers were separating the green grams from the husk. This village grew Kharif crops, which could be seen outside every house. While drawing the village map, a curious crowd of children gathered around us, their faces alight with wonder and amusement as they saw the detailed map of their very own village.

Roaming in the scorching heat, the sun gleamed above us. Every household we passed, warmly offered us food and enquired about the purpose of our survey. Most youths were either at school, farms or running errands at the Taluka, which delayed the start of our survey. Our presence and survey had created an air of curiosity in the village.





The next day, two kilometers away from the village we saw a huge herd of Deccani sheep led by a single person and lots of people attending an event where the religious hymns were sung. It was **Balu Mama's** (a saint) **Mahaprasad** organized by the villagers. Young girls attending the **Mahaprasad**, wearing a sectarian mark on their forehead recognised us through our car's window and announced loudly in excitement **"Surveywalya Tai aalya aahet!"** (Didi's conducting survey has come!). The energy and excitement of the young girls were truly contagious, igniting our own enthusiasm.

The secrecy of the questions piqued other youth's interest and encouraged by their friends, the youth approached us to be surveyed. A friendly rivalry began to outshine their peers. The youth enjoyed solving the math questions with visuals rather than only text questions. Observing their kids solving questions, parents became fondly nostalgic about their good old school days and wished their kids'

aspirations would come true.

#### *The kind lady drying our soggy paper*

The weather took a 180-degree turn, from scorching heat to heavy rains and thunder. Pallavi and I searched for shelter under heavy rains till a kind lady invited us into her house, sheltering us. The lady offered to dry our drenched papers under the fan and revitalized our energy with her warm Cardamom (*elaichi*) tea. After completing the survey, Pallavi and I expressed gratitude to the villagers for their support.

Overall, my experience in the field was filled with endless walks, attentiveness to the survey, villagers' warm hospitality and comrading with Pallavi. The local dialect and accent were hard for me to comprehend, but thanks to Pallavi! She was the crucial link of communication between me and the villagers. This survey experience was not just about data collection but the profound human connection that binds us all.



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