

## Hope is Contagious: My Experience with ASER Volunteers

I stepped out into the scorching heat of October and began looking for an auto rickshaw. The extreme levels of humidity made me swelter but I looked forward to embarking upon my fieldwork for ASER 2023 at Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh. So far, I had heard, read and known that ASER is a volunteer-led survey; I was keen to experience it. The team partnered with a women's college and was able to bring together about 60 young women in the age group of 19-22 years; this cohort was slightly elder than ASER Beyond Basic's age group of 14-18 years. My colleagues and I were welcomed and greeted cheerfully by the group. Their smiles and curious eyes filled the room, creating an atmosphere of optimism and excitement.

The introduction was followed by the training of the volunteers. Their cooperation and enthusiasm remained consistently high throughout the training. They were all close-knit and supportive, always ready to help one another and build each other's confidence. Their energy levels soared higher during our pilot visit and the subsequent actual survey. On the day of the pilot, I was guiding a group of 9 volunteers. As all 10 of us managed to squeeze into one auto rickshaw, I asked them



if they were nervous or excited. They had mixed feelings, but we managed to make everyone feel at ease through shared humour. Before we set off, the volunteer sitting beside me handed out candies to everyone, including me, with a warm smile. She mentioned that she had counted me as well when buying the candies. Her kind gesture filled my heart with warmth and gratitude.

All of us started walking in the village, marking and making the village map. All of them diligently followed the process they were trained for. On our way back, they shared their experience of conducting the survey in the village and asked interesting questions. One of them shared with utter disbelief her encounter with a young boy: "Ma'am, he has completed Class 9 but could not perform long division. I wonder how he came this far." This moment encapsulated the stark reality of educational disparities that ASER strives to address.

Throughout the training, whenever I got a chance to engage in conversations with the volunteers, I learnt that quite a few of them were either married or engaged. At the same time, I was glad that they were continuing their education; all of them were brimming with aspirations to study hard and pursue employment opportunities, and expected support from their families to do so. I was amazed to learn about the value that these bright young women attached to education, and their determination to realise their dreams and aspirations.

The support I received from the local communities and the resilience of our young women volunteers filled me with immense hope. While ASER's 'Beyond Basics' report would give us a broad idea of the youth's aspirations, I found the confidence and aspirations of these young women rejuvenating and life-affirming. This experience has galvanised me and encouraged me to carry on my best efforts doing to support the youth of our country.

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