

## A journey Through Time

ASER'23 training took me back to the heady days of college - a sprawling university campus, racing students navigating the morning chaos, classes of every topic in hue, and a salubrious weather that afforded us several cups of *chai* during the day.

The 3-day training that took place at Kashi Vidyapith University, an academic behemoth in Benaras, brought diverse teams from Pratham together. While some were embarking on their debut experience, others brought the wisdom of the seasoned veteran.

The volunteers who were all students of this university were a diverse mix too - while most were eager to absorb the training, a few, burdened by the intensity of the training, gradually stopped coming. The training that was ably guided by *Sunil Ji* always started on a high note, featured breaks that more or less involved all of us breaking into song and dance, and concluded with increased clarity and yet left all of us with lingering questions.

After numerous sessions, role plays, Q&As, and the pilot, the volunteers armed with all the knowledge and ASER resources, stepped onto the field with excitement and disquietude in equal measure. The village on the first day was spread across large swathes of land and half the day was spent just walking seemingly endlessly to chart the entire length and breadth of the village, and create a map. What followed was not unexpected - nervous kids being asked to take 'exam' under intense scrutiny, prodding parents, and neighbors and friends gathered to watch the spectacle with gleeful smiles, while the volunteers remained laser-focused on their goal of completing 20 houses in 3 days.



As we traversed the survey route, the pronounced difference between the dalit *basti* and others were hard to miss - their precarious housing condition, a sense of mistrust towards outsiders, and a compelling need to accommodate our presence with no questions asked. Despite these differences, the long winding roads through the villages always guided us to the tall, unwavering statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar, clad in his iconic blue suit and holding the Constitution firmly. This experience coincided with my reading of

'*Becoming Babasaheb*' by Akash Singh Rathore. The chapter I was engrossed in aligned with my ASER experience, titled '*Educate, Agitate, Organize*'. In the year 1924-25, Babasaheb led the initiative to establish student hostels in Solapur, Jalgaon and Panvel for the Dalit youth, providing accommodation, clothes, books - an unprecedented step at that time.

As I walked back from the village, I took a photo of Babasaheb and reflected on his clarion call of '*Educate, Agitate, Organize*.'

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