

The Aspirations of the Kumaris of Bihar

In the backdrop of the Bihari monsoon, receding yet trying to assert its dominance with frequent spurts of rain, Pratham conducted the ASER survey in the villages of Muzaffarpur. Water-logged streets (nay, semi-paved terrains), lush green fields, and rain overflowing through the *Kuccha* houses made it a perfect setting for a week-long immersion (pun intended) into rural India. The 2023 ASER seeks to go beyond basics and understand the aspirations of the rural youth in the country, apart from testing their basic reading and arithmetic skills. The survey also tested them on their digital literacy, giving them a few tasks- from asking them to set an alarm clock to navigating their way using GPS on their phones.

What I particularly was interested in were the aspirations of young women, all 14 to 18-year-olds, in a state that is by many indicators not only the poorest but also has the [lowest Female Worker Population](#) ratio in the country. Add to it that Bihar also happens to be the state I come from, and I had both professional and personal reasons to look forward to the ASER experience.

As we went from door to door, I could see a pattern in the answers we received from the female respondents. First, as the title (pun intended again) of the article would suggest, they had a *Kumari* at the end of their names, a fact that I was not a stranger to as my mother herself was a *Kumari* till she married. *Kumari* is a common surname for many women in Bihar, with its usage linked to the [socio-political movements](#) the state has seen. *Kumari* typically means an unmarried girl or a young unmarried woman. Interestingly, *Kumari* is derived from a Sanskrit word that means Princess. In a beautiful way, all these young girls were proudly calling themselves Princess, though they might not be aware of it or feel like one (given their living conditions are in stark contrast to that of a Princess).

Another pattern I observed as I was monitoring the survey was the conviction in their eyes as they almost jumped up answering “Yes!” when asked if they would like to study further (“*Agar mauka mila to kyu nahi?*”, some of them would add). I observed that the responses to what they aspire to become varied from girl to girl in the same village. Some would give me an expected-doctor/teacher answer. Some responses would evoke a surprise in me- wanting to join the Indian Army. Yes, now there is a new group of girls who are playing PubG (or maybe, Free Fire; I do not know what’s trending right now) and want to join the *Fauj*. Unfortunately, a lot of responses were also a simple *Socha Nahi* (I have not thought about it). The women, their mothers, relatives, and neighbours, standing around them as the survey took place, would often add, “It does not matter what she wants. It is what we can provide for.”

The mother-daughter equation played out beautifully during the survey. While the older women would watch the young girl take the survey silently, it was the non-verbal communication between the mother and the daughter that was fascinating. The mother and daughter would often exchange eye contact and laugh, half in embarrassment and half in mischief, when the latter would tell the surveyors that she is using Instagram and Snapchat, as the men of the community watched on with

stoic expressions, not giving away a hint of what they felt. The mothers, who usually were 8th-grade dropouts or completely denied education, would sit fascinated as they watched their daughters take a crack at the digital tasks of the survey on a smartphone. Maybe, they saw themselves in their daughters. Or maybe, they secretly wished they could get the same technology when they were growing up. Maybe it was both- I could only guess.

However, I don't want to idealize my experience in rural India excessively, as some travel narratives about urban areas tend to do. It's important to acknowledge that 18-year-old girls and boys in these rural regions still grapple with fundamental math problems like two-digit subtraction and long division. As I also witnessed young boys and girls struggling to read English, I couldn't help but reflect on how the urban Indian middle class might continue to close its doors to these kids when they are compelled to move to the cities. It's a concern that these children, who have distinct identities in their villages, could eventually blend into the mass of nameless Bihari laborers working throughout the country, thereby perpetuating the existing stereotypes.

Most youth are in a long-distance relationship with their schools and colleges (to be differentiated from a Distance Course). How frequently do they visit their educational institutes? Some pay a "homage" once a month, some once a week, and some only when there is an exam.

Some houses (rather huts) did not have toilets- maybe the fields are still being used? The fields remind me of a visual that I find hard to forget. The eyes of the girl, that glittered with excitement when answering if she wanted to study further, filled up with shame when she was asked if she was working currently. The same fields, that are probably a part of her morning routine, are where she goes to work for a daily wage. As she hung her head in shame after answering, and as the smile on her mother's face vanished in an instant, we casually moved on to the next question, normalising poverty as the rich elite are wont to.

Photo Walk:



The Dark Night: *This picture I took seemed symbolic. As the electricity went out at the time of the survey, the women gathered around the girl with their flashlights to support her.*



Pretty and Poor: *Rains made the villages look greener.*



Eye Contact: *The women would often sit where the survey was taking place. The non-verbal communication between the girl and the mother was interesting to observe.*



Lead us unto Light from Darkness: *A single lit LED bulb in a Kuccha house seemed to represent hope in an abyss of helplessness. Maybe I was too desperate to look for optimism.*

Author: Tushar Singh, Pratham