

Why am I Looking Forward to ASER 2023

“India’s largest citizen-led survey”. Of all the claims and findings that are described in every ASER report, these are some of the most powerful words written in those pages.

Research has often been considered a pathway intended for the academic elite. It exists within the hallowed halls of universities, in pristine research labs and in papers that are published but rarely read. As students of research, when we attended the ASER 2023 National Workshop in Jaipur, the question we were determined to answer - What does it truly mean to be a citizen-led survey?

Our little field trip took us from training halls directly into the heart of villages across Jaipur. We learnt not just the what, when, where, why, how of ASER but also had the privilege of spending time the who's who of ASER. Researchers from every corner of the country had assembled together. All these researchers only had one goal in mind – to ensure that they understood the A to Z of ASER 2023, so they may train thousands of volunteers to implement the survey with perfection. Not just train them with the technical proficiency required to complete the survey, but also to reinforce the integrity needed to follow a rigorous data collection protocol.

It would take a thesis for us to summarise everything that we learnt during the workshop, so instead we'd like to present you with three stories from three little villages of Jaipur. By the end of these tales, you'll hopefully know why you too should look forward to ASER 2023.

1. Kankrel - Unveiling Youths' Aspirations Beyond Their Laughter - Dhanashree Gurudu

On a bright sunny Sunday, five of us sat in a rickshaw and left for our village survey pilot. Passing through vibrant greens and golden fields we reached “Kankrel”. We met the *Sarpanch*, to ask for his support as we began to survey the village. After a seemingly never-ending walk, we reached a *dhani*, spoke to some villagers and outlined a map of the village.

Our quest led us to a house that appeared to be under construction. There were 3- 4 women engaged in conversation outside the house. We enquired if there were youth aged 14 to 18 in the house, and a woman nodded hesitantly. We explained that we were there for a survey and described our reasons for being in their village. After much deliberation, they agreed. The woman who had initially nodded called for a youth, and a girl who had just turned 14 came out of the house.



Together with the youth, we sat on the *charpai* near the house. We asked her if she felt comfortable participating in the survey, she gave us a shy smile and nodded. A few minutes into the survey, the women started to gather around us curiously. As we progressed, the women started passing

comments about her responses, making her doubt her answers. We requested them to refrain from distracting her, and this was followed by a chorus of giggles. We smiled and continued.

While responding to questions about her aspirations, she doubtfully mentioned that she wanted to become a doctor. Unfortunately, her response was met with more laughter. My co-surveyor and I spent equal amounts of time reassuring her and requesting the watchers to avoid distractions.

Throughout the assessment tool, she seemed tense. At one instance, she copied a subtraction question onto her rough sheet, gazed at it for several minutes, looked at us, then back at the problem. Comforting her, we suggested she take a sip of water and assured her that she wouldn't be graded based on her response. This helped her feel more at ease but we could see her sweating.

This was the slowest of all the surveys we had done that day, but we patiently waited for her to complete the assessment. At the end, we praised her performance and encouraged her to pursue her aspirations.

This made me realise that while this was a data collection exercise for us, she was experiencing some version of an examination hall and the burdensome weight of performance pressure that it brings. While she was more focussed on providing the "right" answers with her wavering confidence, we as surveyors were more determined for her to do her best.

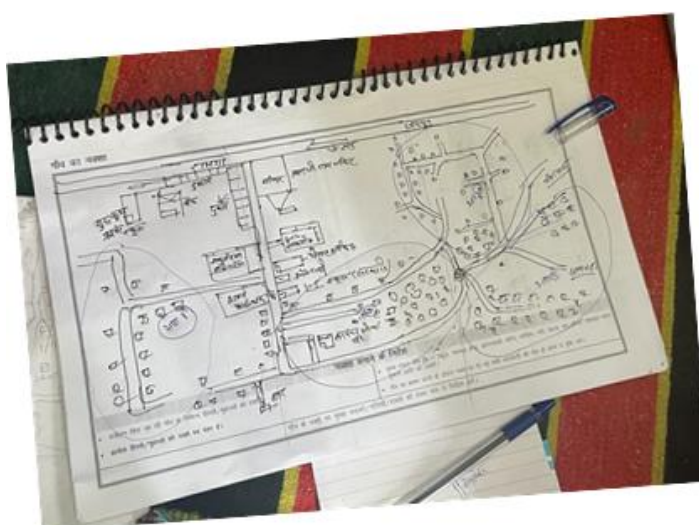
2. Saypura - It All Runs In The Family - Angel Mohan

Not very far from the city of Jaipur, my group and I ventured into a village called "Saypura". We walked through the scenic narrow roads adorned with *bajra* and tractors frequently crossing our path. Women dressed in *ghoongats* made their way into shops, observing us strangers pass them by.

As we explored *Saypura*, the village revealed its affluence, activity, and unique charm. I was particularly excited for 2 tasks: meticulously mapping the village and testing our new tools with the village youth. I felt like I was enlisted on a mission. Our team of five set out in two directions, intending to reunite at a designated point later.

In most households we crossed, the parents would be hopping over to check the answers of the youth. They were constantly seeking validation, asking questions like 'is my child correct', 'are they doing well', 'she must be doing it all wrong', reminding me of the days when my parents' worried about my academic life.

But it wasn't just the parents who played a role in influencing the youth during the survey. Our third household was a family with 4 kids - 2 boys and 2 girls - the eldest of whom was a girl in the 14 to 18 age group. I noticed a bicycle in the yard but when I asked about it the girls said they were scared to ride it while the boys boasted about their cycling skills. It became quite clear that while we had only one eligible participant, we would have to engage the other 3 if we had to complete our survey properly. The brothers exhibited typical sibling bully behaviours; teasing and questioning their sister's capabilities when she started her assessment. They would often laugh playfully



mocking her answers. One could tell that this was affecting her morale.

To make the survey process more comfortable for her, my co-surveyor engaged the brothers, making them do difficult division questions on the side. The sister heaved a sigh of relief and that translated into her body language as well. While initially she was hesitant to share or even think about her aspirations, she later expressed she wanted to be a doctor just like her uncle in the next town. While bidding adieu I shared a story from my early years about my embarrassing and painful falls while learning to ride the bicycle. The fact that this experience was normalised for them gave them the confidence to consider trying cycling some day.

As if to reward us for our efforts, at the next house, we met a grandmother who agreed to wake up all her grandkids from their siesta, just so they could participate in the survey. She served us tea and introduced us to her husband. Unlike the previous households, she praised her grandkid, elaborating how she's the youngest to be admitted to college. The household environment was so promising that the youth herself surprised us by answering all our questions swiftly and being very aware and proactive in nature.

As we sat under a tree at the end of the day, this got me thinking that there are different ways families impose or encourage learning, through teasing, concern or nudges. Nevertheless, all of them wanted their child to do better than the rest, and that was perhaps what brought them all together.

3. Narampura – It Takes A Village - Annette Francis

As my teammates and I walked through “Narampura”, we were painfully aware that it was indeed August in Jaipur. For someone who spends the better part of their work day behind a computer screen, I was guilelessly excited about spending the day doing fieldwork. We met the Sarpanch, the local village leaders, children, parents, and of course the youth whom we were in desperate search of, in order to complete our pilot surveys.

Our presence in the village had naturally created a stir. Everyone was curious to see what it was that we were up to. Some were welcoming, some were curious, and some were distant. We knocked on several doors, some where the children were too young and some where the youth were too old.

After we had unsuccessfully knocked on our 12th door, one lady called us into her yard and we assumed she wanted to know more about the survey. But instead, she pulled out two chairs and placed them right in front of the big cooler in her house. She brought two giant tumblers of water and asked us to sit. We slumped in relief in front of the cooling air, and thanked her profusely. But lady luck had more to offer us. When we told her that we were in search of 14-18 year old youth in the village, she told us that there was a 15 year old girl at the end of the road.

We began walking with motivation, but our road wasn't very smooth. Quite literally in fact, because there was a JCB ploughing through the road that we were walking on. I assumed that this meant we couldn't go forward. We asked a group of people near the road if there was indeed a 15-year old girl at the end of the road. They laughed and told us why bother walking through that way, when we could just sit under a fan and fill up the data any way we wanted.



We smiled politely but decided to traverse the road ahead in search of our youth. Our determination seemed to surprise the village. Even though we knew we might find her only at the end of the road, we still knocked on every door along the way to make sure there were no other 14- to 18-year-olds along the way.

Finally, we found our Goldilocks! When we interviewed that 15-year-old girl, it made our hearts sing, but the real highlight of this story was that when we walked back, every sceptic whom we had previously met asked us if she did well in the test. That reaction is how I understood that it really does take a village to raise a child, and in that moment, it changed the way I looked at the findings of ASER. The data points do not just tell the story of how youth are doing today, they are a reflection of how we as a community are working towards preparing our young people for the future.

ASER 2023 will offer us the opportunity to understand today's youth in a more comprehensive manner. The findings will help us understand their activities, abilities, awareness, and aspirations. But it will fall to the rest of us in the ecosystem to apply these findings in a manner that improves the quality of our interventions, the scope of our policies, and the depth of our impact. Only then will we be able to experience the *aser* of ASER.