More than a recovery

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This year ASER 2024 went back to almost all rural districts of the country to report on children's schooling status and basic reading and arithmetic levels. Starting in 2016, ASER began a new cycle wherein the nationwide "basic" ASER was done every other year. This cycle was interrupted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in school closures for almost two years and seriously affected movement in the field in 2020 and 2021. ASER 2022, done across the country four years after 2018, was one of the very few sources of data on the impact of the pandemic on the education sector.

There were two key findings of ASER 2022. First, on the enrollment front, fears that children, especially older children, would drop out of school because of the financial hardships imposed by the pandemic on families seemed baseless. In fact, enrollment rates of older children (15-16 year-olds) have been steadily rising and continued to do so even during the pandemic. Further, the proportion of not currently enrolled 6-14-year-old children was down to 1.6% — almost half of what was observed in 2018, and the lowest we have seen in the decade since the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 came into effect. However, the big change we saw in 2022 in enrollment was a jump in government school enrollment that had been falling steadily since 2016. The proportion of 6-14-year-olds enrolled in government schools rose from 65.6% in 2018 to 72.9% in 2022.

Second, on the learning front, ASER 2022 showed large learning losses across both government and private schools in reading. Reading levels for Std III and V children, which had slowly been rising between 2014 and 2018, fell below their 2014 levels. While learning loss was expected, it still felt like a big setback. For arithmetic, while there was loss at the All-India level, it was much smaller as compared to the loss in reading.

Both these findings came with some qualifications though, as I wrote in the ASER 2022 and 2020 reports.[2, 3] In both cases, one data point, viz 2022, was insufficient to establish a trend. Many low-cost private schools shut down during the pandemic, which may have led to higher government school enrollments. In addition, the financial stress induced by the pandemic may have led to parents shifting their children to free government schools, which were also distributing dry rations during the school closures. In 2022, the country was still dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic and it was too early to say if the increase in government school enrollment was a temporary or permanent shift.

Similarly, in the case of learning, 2022 estimates were being compared with estimates from four years ago. Between 2018 and 2022, we had pandemic-induced school closures for almost two years, in 2020 and 2021, and almost a year when children had been back in school in 2021-22. With no data point in between, it was once again difficult to attribute the entire loss to the pandemic. Most importantly, a new National Education Policy (NEP) was introduced in 2020 with a focus for the first time on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN). The policy explicitly recognised the importance of FLN skills and set goals for achieving universal FLN by the end of Std II/III under the NIPUN Bharat Mission. As early as 2021, many states started various programs to improve FLN skills in primary grades. While there was no nationwide ASER between 2018 and 2022, ASER looked for opportunities to go back to the field and was able to conduct representative surveys in three states in 2021– Karnataka in February 2021, Chhattisgarh in October 2021, and West Bengal in December 2021. These three state-level surveys gave estimates of learning levels that could be used to understand the extent of learning loss during the pandemic. What they showed was that in all three states, learning levels had fallen by far more than the loss between 2018 and 2022. In fact, there had been a recovery between 2021 and 2022, possibly prompted by the government's efforts to boost FLN skills.

ASER 2024 estimates are, therefore, extremely useful for a variety of reasons. They provide one more data point after 2022 to verify if the changes observed post-pandemic have changed the trend or if the country has reverted to the earlier trend line. On the learning front, states have continued to push ahead with a variety of measures to improve foundational learning levels in primary school. Given that the ASER assessment is essentially a floor-level foundational learning assessment, data from ASER 2024 will also help track the progress of NIPUN Bharat across the country.

First, let's look at enrollment. The mandate of the RTE 2009 of universal school enrollment for the 6-14 age group has more or less been achieved at the All-India level. The proportion of children in this age group who are currently not enrolled in school is 1.9% (just slightly above the 2022 figure of 1.6%). While enrollment for the 7-10 age group was close to 98% even in 2010, when RTE 2009 came into effect, larger numbers were out of school in the older age groups. Despite the

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[2] Wadhwa, W. (2023) More recovery than loss, ASER 2022. Available at: https://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202022%20report%20pdfs/Articles/More%20Recovery%20than%20Loss_Wilima%20Wadhwa.pdf.

[3] Wadhwa, W. (2021) Equity in the time of COVID, ASER 2020. Available at: https://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202021/ASER%202020%20wave%201%20-%20v2/commentary_wilimawadhwa.pdf.

pandemic, the proportion of 11–14-year-olds who are currently not enrolled has continued to fall, and now stands at about 2% — only slightly above the 2022 figure of 1.8%. More importantly, a much larger proportion of 15-16-year-olds were not enrolled in school — 16.1% — in 2010. Even though this age group is not covered by the RTE, this proportion has also been steadily falling, and now stands at 7.9%, slightly above the 2022 figure of 7.5%. Further, these increasing enrollments for older age groups are seen for both boys and girls. The fact that the proportion of children not currently enrolled has increased slightly for every age group as compared to 2022, might indicate that in 2022 the economy was just coming out of the pandemic and there was still some fluidity in the system. The 2024 estimates, on the other hand, are more of a reflection of the post-pandemic reality.

However, the increase in government school enrollment seen during the COVID-19 years seems to have reversed. Private school enrollment has been steadily rising since 2006 in rural India. The proportion of 6–14-year-olds enrolled in private schools rose from 18.7% in 2006 to 30.8% in 2014 and stayed at that level in 2018. During the pandemic years, there was a big jump in government school enrollment with the proportion of 6–14-year-old children enrolled in government schools rising from 65.6% in 2018 to 72.9% in 2022. This number is back to 66.8% in 2024. This almost complete reversal back to 2018 levels is seen across grades as well as gender, and is not particularly surprising given that the economy has recovered in other sectors as well.

To summarise, ASER 2024 brings good news on the enrollment front. Out of school numbers for older age groups that had been falling steadily are well below their 2018 levels though marginally higher than the 2022 estimates, and government and private school enrollment is back to 2018 levels. This seems to confirm that the increase in government school enrollment observed during the COVID years was driven more by necessity rather than choice.

Next, coming to learning, there is even better news! Not only do we see a full recovery from the pandemic-induced learning loss, learning levels in primary grades are higher than past levels in some cases. At the All-India level, the proportion of children in Std III who are able to read at Std II level, rose slowly from 23.6% in 2014 to 27.3% in 2018 and then fell drastically to 20.5% in 2022. Two years later, we have a full recovery with the proportion of Std III children reading fluently at 27.1%. We see a similar picture in Std V with the proportion of Std V children who can read a Std II level text rising from 48% in 2014 to 50.5% in 2018, then falling to 42.8% in 2022, and finally recovering to 48.8% in 2024.

In arithmetic, the learning loss post-pandemic in 2022, was smaller in comparison to reading. The proportion of children in Std III able to do at least subtraction[4] rose from 25.4% in 2014 to 28.2% in 2018 and fell to 25.9% in 2022 — a fall of less than 3 percentage points which was much lower than the 7 percentage point loss observed in reading ability of Std III children. In 2024, this proportion stands at 33.7%, which is far more than a recovery, and higher than we have seen in the last decade. Similarly, in Std V the proportion of children able to do at least division[5] rose from 26.1% in 2014 to 27.9% in 2018, and declined to 25.6% in 2022. The 2024 number stands at 30.7% — again, much higher than levels in the past many years.

What is remarkable about this recovery is that it is completely driven by government schools. In rural India, government schools have always lagged behind private schools in terms of learning levels. There is a vast literature on the learning differential between government and private schools, highlighting the fact that simply comparing learning levels across the two is misleading because of the self-selection effect. Children who go to private schools come from more affluent homes and have more educated parents — household characteristics that are positively correlated to learning. Therefore, attributing the entire difference in learning levels to a school effect is incorrect. Nevertheless, even after controlling for these household characteristics, private schools do have an edge in learning over government schools. What we see in the ASER 2024 data is that the recovery has really been in government schools, with learning levels in private schools still below their pre-pandemic levels. For instance, the proportion of children in Std III able to read a Std II level text was 20.9% in government schools as compared to 40.6% in private schools in 2018 (Table 1). In 2022, while learning levels in all schools suffered, the decline in private schools was far greater than in government schools, though the private school advantage remained the same, namely, twice as high as government school levels. However, in 2024, while the proportion of children in Std III able to read at Std II level in government schools increased from 16.3% in 2022 to 23.4%, surpassing the 2018 level, the recovery in private schools was more muted – from 33.1% to 35.5%, lower than the pre-pandemic level in 2018. As a result, the learning differential was reduced from 20 percentage points in 2018 to 12 percentage points. Reading levels in Std V tell a similar story.

In arithmetic, both government and private schools have seen large jumps in learning levels, with 2024 levels surpassing levels 10 years ago (Table 2). However, here again, the gains in government schools have been far greater than those in private schools. For instance, between 2022 and 2024, the proportion of children able to do subtraction in Std III increased by 36.6% — from 20.2% to 27.6% — in government schools as compared to 10.2% in private schools.

[4] 2-digit numerical subtraction problem with borrowing.

[5] 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division problem.

Table 1: Reading level by school type: All India (rural) 2014- 2024

Year	Std III: % children reading at Std II level			Std V: % children reading at Std II level		
	Govt	Pvt	All	Govt	Pvt	All
2014	17.2	37.8	23.6	42.2	62.6	48.0
2016	19.3	38.0	25.2	41.7	63.0	47.9
2018	20.9	40.6	27.3	44.2	65.1	50.5
2022	16.3	33.1	20.5	38.5	56.8	42.8
2024	23.4	35.5	27.1	44.8	59.3	48.8

Table 2: Arithmetic level by school type: All India (rural) 2014-2024

Year	Std III: % children who can do at least subtraction			Std V: % children who can do division		
	Govt	Pvt	All	Govt	Pvt	All
2014	17.2	43.4	25.4	20.7	39.3	26.1
2016	20.3	44.1	27.7	21.1	38.0	26.0
2018	20.9	43.5	28.2	22.7	39.8	27.9
2022	20.2	43.1	25.9	21.6	38.7	25.6
2024	27.6	47.5	33.7	26.5	41.8	30.7

What has led to this sudden improvement in learning levels? All-India estimates are typically slow to change and learning levels that had been stagnant till 2010 declined slightly thereafter, only improving slowly between 2014 and 2018 (Tables 1 and 2). We have not seen improvements of this magnitude in the last 20 years since ASER has been presenting data on foundational reading and arithmetic. Everything seems to point towards NEP 2020 and its focus on foundational skills. While this is not the first time that programs have been introduced to improve learning, what is different is that it is the first time that there has been a systemic national push to improve foundational learning outcomes. Typically, in past years, school teachers worked "to complete the curriculum". As a result, they ended up teaching to the "top of the class" in a class that is diverse in terms of learning levels and demographic characteristics. For the first time, under NIPUN Bharat, teachers across the country are given a different brief — to focus on foundational skills.

This push towards FLN is also reflected in the ASER 2024 data. As part of the survey, ASER field investigators visit one government school in the sampled village to record enrollment, attendance, and school facilities. This year we also asked whether schools received any directive from the government to implement FLN activities in the school, and whether teachers have received FLN training. At the All-India level, 83% of schools responded that they had received such a directive and 78% said that at least one teacher in the school had been trained on FLN. In addition, 75% had also received teaching learning material (TLM) for FLN activities.

However, these All-India estimates hide the huge variation across states. Even when there is not much movement at the All -India level, there are noticeable changes observed in both directions at the state level. This year as well, some states have done very well and surpassed their pre-pandemic learning levels, and others are yet to recover fully. Nevertheless, almost all states have shown improvements as compared to 2022. In fact, the low performing states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu have made a remarkable recovery. For instance, consider the case of Uttar Pradesh — In 2014, only 6% of government school Std III children could read a Std II level text, and the proportions slowly rose to 12.3% in 2018. Uttar Pradesh was one of the few states not to post a learning loss for Std III in 2022, with the proportion rising to 16.4%. In 2024, the proportion of government school Std III children able to read at Std II level is 27.9%. This kind of improvement cannot be labelled just a recovery — it signifies a serious focus on and effort to improve FLN abilities. This push has borne fruits in arithmetic, in Std V learning levels as well — learning levels in Uttar Pradesh government schools have never been higher in the last 20 years. Interestingly, Uttar Pradesh which has always been a low attendance state – attendance in primary schools has been below 60% since 2010 — showed an increase in attendance this year to 71.4%. Clearly there is something happening in Uttar Pradesh schools that makes children want to come to school and learn.

While the case of Uttar Pradesh is remarkable, there are many other success stories as well. High performing states like Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra, where almost half the children in Std III in government schools could read at Std II level in 2018, saw a halving of this proportion in 2022. These states also posted large learning gains, almost recovering the learning loss of the pandemic. What is clear is that for the first time, the country is coming together behind one mission of improving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy among primary school children.

India is an extremely diverse country with a lot of variation across states. For the first time, the NEP has set clear FLN goals for the entire country, and states are finding different pathways to achieve these goals. ASER 2024 estimates tell the story of these efforts – a story of more than just a recovery!