

# Snapshot of India's youth: ASER 2023

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This year ASER revisits youth in the age group of 14-18 years. In 2017, for the first time, ASER went “Beyond Basics” and delved deeper into the lives of our youth. Are they studying in school or college or in a vocational or technical course? Are they working? What are their study and work aspirations and do they have role models in their lives who can help them achieve these aspirations? Can our youth apply basic reading and arithmetic abilities to navigate everyday tasks like making a budget or doing financial calculations? ASER 2023 explores these domains after a gap of 6 years, as well as digital literacy of youth in the age group of 14-18 years.

However, a lot has changed since 2017. We have had almost two years of school closures in 2020-21 prompted by the COVID pandemic; we have a new National Education Policy (2020), after over three decades, that fundamentally reimagines the education landscape; we have a whole new digital economy that has changed how ordinary people transact on a daily basis. The pandemic affected livelihoods across the country, but thankfully the economy has recovered from the COVID shock and projections put it back on a 6% or higher growth path.

In addition, the COVID pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of the economy. While mobile coverage was almost universal, only 36% of rural households had a smartphone in 2018. During 2020-21, with the economy and the education system transitioning to a virtual mode, having access to a digital device almost became a necessity. The proportion of rural households with a smartphone almost doubled during the pandemic to 67.6% and further increased to 74.8% in 2022. With the narrowing of the digital divide, there is scope to take advantage of the emerging “digital dividend” as well.<sup>2</sup>

With most youth having access to a digital device, ASER 2023 also provides evidence on the kinds of digital activities they are engaging in. Apart from using smartphones for entertainment purposes, do they use smartphones to access educational resources? Can they do simple digital tasks that can help them in school, home and work?

The ASER 2023 sample consists of about 35,000 youth in the age group of 14-18 years from 28 districts spread across 26 states.<sup>3,4</sup> While the sample is not nationally representative, the size and geographical spread gives an overall picture of the rural population in India. It gives a snapshot of the lives of young people in rural India – their school and work status, their digital engagement, their ability to do simple everyday calculations as well as common digital tasks and their aspirations.

Most young people are enrolled in some educational institution – 86.8% of 14-18 year olds are enrolled in either school or college. Not surprisingly, the proportion of youth who are currently not enrolled in school or college rises with age from 3.9% of 14-year-olds to 10.9% of 16-year-olds and 32.6% of 18-year-olds. One major worry at the time of COVID was that with livelihoods being threatened, older children would drop out of school. That fear turned out to be unfounded. The proportion of out of school children and youth has been secularly declining, led by the government’s push to universalise secondary education. Compared to ASER 2017, the proportion of youth currently not enrolled is lower in 2023, apart from 18-year-olds.<sup>5</sup> This is also reflected in the fact that more and more young people now have completed



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<sup>2</sup> World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2016>)

<sup>3</sup> States and Union Territories not represented in the sample are Chandigarh, Delhi, Sikkim, Manipur, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Goa, Lakshadweep, Puducherry, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

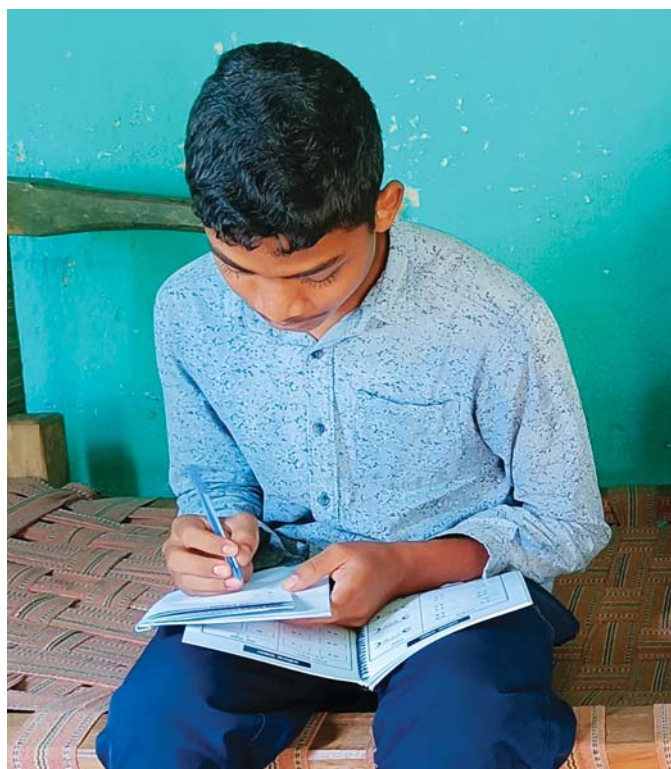
<sup>4</sup> For more details on how the districts were sampled, see the note on sampling in this report on page 223.

<sup>5</sup> ASER 2017 was based on a sample of about 30,000 youth from 26 districts across 24 states. Since the districts in the ASER 2023 sample are not same, the estimates are not strictly comparable. However, given the large sample size and geographical spread of the two surveys, estimates are indicative of national trends.

8 or more years of schooling – 84% compared to 81% in 2017.

However, while young people are remaining in school longer, there does not seem to be much change in their foundational literacy and numeracy skills (FLN). In 2017, 76.6% of 14-18-year-olds could read a Std II level text. In 2023, this number is slightly lower at 73.6%. In arithmetic, in 2017, 39.5% of youth could do a simple (Std III/IV level) division problem. In 2023, this proportion is slightly higher at 43.3%. Needless to say, there are differences across grades and by enrollment status – more youth in higher grades can do these tasks and similarly learning levels of youth who are enrolled in school/college are much higher than among those who are not enrolled. For instance, 78.1% youth who were enrolled in school/college could read at Std II level as compared to 43.2% of those who were not enrolled in school. Similarly, 47.5% of enrolled youth could do division as compared 14.7% of those who were not currently enrolled.

However, this doesn't take away from the fact that a sizeable proportion of our youth do not have basic reading and numeracy skills. Of course, if a student has progressed through the school system without acquiring these foundational abilities, they are unlikely to acquire them later since teachers follow the grade curriculum and assume that students in their grade have met the requirements of the previous grade.



For the first time ASER also recorded the course stream of students enrolled in Std XI, XII and in college. In Std XI and XII, 54% are enrolled in arts & humanities, 9.3% in commerce and 33.7% in science. Typically, students who are enrolled in science in Std XI and XII are high performers in Std IX so as to have been selected into the science stream, and are therefore more likely to be at grade level. Not surprisingly, among these students, 92.8% were able to read a Std II level text and 69.7% could do the division problem. This further underscores the point that FLN deficits need to be corrected at the time they occur, otherwise learning deficits just accumulate as students are confronted with higher level competencies as they advance through the school system. The importance of FLN skills is recognised in the NEP 2020 which clearly states that “the highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025.” It further states that the “rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved.”

However, some would argue that this is too simplistic – that a more holistic approach is needed and that even children who may not be fluent readers can do many other things. After all, why should we care whether children can do a division problem or not, as long as they know how to use a calculator to get the answer? While more and more students are staying in the school system and transitioning to secondary schooling, it is still the case that a fair number, especially 17-18 year olds, are not. These youth are most likely part of the labour force – indeed, 54.7% are working and are unlikely to come back to school to study further. An obvious question then is, apart from academic competencies, do our youth have basic skills to do everyday tasks?

ASER 2023 also included some functional tasks that youth might encounter in their daily routines such as reading and understanding instructions on a medicine package, or applying a discount on an item on sale, or calculating repayment on a loan or browsing the internet to find information. Some of these tasks were also included in ASER 2017 – so we can gauge if there is any change in these functional abilities in the last few years. Here again, there is little change.

As an example, consider two tasks – one that required some basic numeracy and one that required reading ability. We asked youth to do a simple calculation that required them to use the unitary method – if 3 chlorine tablets are needed to purify 15 litres of water, how many chlorine tablets are needed to purify 25 litres of water? In 2017, 50.2% youth could answer correctly and six years later the proportion was 48.4%. Another question that was asked in both years was reading the instructions on an Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) package and answering some questions based on this text. In 2017, 64.1% of youth could answer 3 out of 4 questions correctly. The corresponding proportion for 2023 was higher at 65.1%. These numbers look suspiciously close to the proportion of youth who can do basic arithmetic and read simple text. In fact,

there is a positive relationship between these foundational competencies and the ability to do everyday tasks. In 2023, among those who could do the division problem, a much larger proportion – 63.3% – could do the unitary method task. Similarly, among readers, a slightly higher proportion – 68.8% – could answer 3 out of 4 questions correctly on the ORS task. The correlation with academic abilities is evident even more starkly when we consider the performance of the science and commerce stream students. Among both groups, about 64% could do the unitary method question and about 82% the ORS questions. These two groups were the top performers in other applied tasks as well.

All of this points to the importance of foundational skills, not just for academic advancement but also to traverse daily life. This seems fairly obvious and the NEP's push to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Std III, recently amended to Std II, is a welcome new direction. However, as ASER 2022 and previous ASERs have shown, there is a need to improve FLN in higher grades as well. According to ASER 2022, more than 50% children are not fluent readers in Std V and even in Std VIII close to 30% children cannot read at Std II level. ASER 2023 data is just a reflection of this ground reality. Under NIPUN Bharat, states are making a big effort to achieve the universal FLN goal, for current and entering cohorts in Std I and II. But, a concerted effort is also needed to address the FLN deficits of children in higher grades as well as of youth who are no longer enrolled in an educational institution.

Apart from the focus on FLN, NEP 2020 also stresses the importance of moving from a rote based system to one which requires students to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills rather than relying on memorising material in their textbooks. It states, "The key overall thrust of curriculum and pedagogy reform across all stages will be to move the education system towards real understanding and towards learning how to learn – and away from the culture of rote learning as is largely present today." It goes on to further state, "Curriculum content will be reduced in each subject to its core essentials, to make space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning." This is a very welcome change – the Indian education system is often criticised for its "over ambitious" curriculum which does not take into account that many students have large learning deficits and are unable to cope with the grade level curriculum. For instance, in 2009, the only year when two states in India participated in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), the results were second from last, just above Kyrgyzstan.<sup>6</sup>

A task in ASER 2023 that might be considered as requiring some critical thinking was one where the youth were showed the interest rate offered by 3 banks. They were asked that if they were to take a loan of Rs. 20,000, which bank would they go to and what would be the total amount they would have to pay back after a year. The lowest interest rate was 12%. This question was only administered to youth who could do at least a subtraction problem (63.3%) of the sample. Of these only 10.6% – or about 6% of all youth – could answer both questions correctly. Calculating the interest due involves doing a percentage problem – about 37% could do that.<sup>7</sup> However, the final answer required them to add the interest to the principal to get the repayment amount. This is a fairly simple operation, and yet very few could do both tasks to arrive at the correct answer. Even the science and commerce stream students in Std XI and XII, 50% of who could do the discount problem, faltered in the repayment question – only about 20% of these students could answer correctly.

Again, one can debate the importance of being able to calculate percentages when there is a calculator in every smartphone. If the same proportion of students who got the discount question correct had gotten the repayment question correct, one could put it down to a lack of academic skills – they just don't know how to calculate percentages. However, adding back the interest to the principal is a very simple operation but many of them missed doing that. What we need is a reorientation of how we teach, so that students can apply the academic concepts and knowledge they learn in school to real life situations. The fact that the NEP recognises this and articulates it is a beginning but maybe it is time to get into mission mode, just the way we did with FLN goals.

At some level, India is in a unique position right now. The economy has recovered fully from the COVID shock; unlike China it still has a young population and a "demographic dividend" to exploit; the digital divide between rural and urban areas has been narrowing giving rise to a "digital dividend". In this scenario, the importance of human capital especially that of our youth cannot be emphasised enough. For India to become the world's third largest economy, the quality of our labour force has to keep pace with our developmental needs. We can only reap the "demographic dividend" associated with a young population if our youth are well supported to achieve their aspirations and participate productively in the growth process of the economy.

<sup>6</sup> PISA, conducted by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, is a standardised assessment in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, of 15 year olds, that emphasises problem solving over rote learning. It "seeks to measure how well young adults have acquired the knowledge and skills that are required to function as successful members of society").

<sup>7</sup> ASER 2023 also had another question that required youth to calculate a discount which involves a similar mathematical operation.