

## Stories from the Field



**Azad Jammu & Kashmir – Neelum:** The Neelum Valley in the region of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, adjacent to the Indian occupied Kashmir turned out to be one of the most difficult districts to reach for ASER. The lack of infrastructure and earthquake damaged roads was a major impediment in reaching numerous areas of the Valley, even for the local people. 10 hours of road travel from Muzaffarabad, adjacent to the beautiful Neelum River is not an easy travelling expedition to take. However there remains no second opinion on the incredibility of the region's magnificence. It truly is 'heaven on earth', as the saying goes.

Taking pictures of the sceneries was particularly disallowed in Sharda, the central tehsil of the Neelum Valley because of its proximity to the line of control. The only girls' school in the region was host to a small hut for shelter in case of emergency shelling from adjacent areas.

Regardless of the conditions prevailing in the region, the local people were enthusiastic towards issues pertaining to education. Artistic supplementary materials used in schools, a college for girls and ruins of a sizeable Buddhist University all show a high fervor towards acquiring education.

**Ravish Amjad**

**Balochistan – Quetta:** Reaching to inaccessible communities is the task that ASER holds on its shoulders. A task, which has so many unexplored problems ranging from insurgencies, displacement of villages due to floods, famine etc. ASER Balochistan 2011 survey was planned to be completed in 18 districts from each corner of the province of Balochistan. It took more than 2 months to complete the arduous task. It took longer than expected, mainly because of the displacement - due to the 2010 floods - of not just a few people but whole villages. There were also incidences where villages had been shifted to newly created districts.

The high spirits of the field teams in Balochistan was the reason why we were able to complete the ASER survey in 15 districts, even after confronting the above said problems, along with cultural barriers, physical distances and limited resources.

The lengthy distances from one place to another and in some cases from one hamlet of the village to another took hours of traveling on foot that too in a mountainous region could have only been done by high spirited and vigorous young people. My salute to ASER Balochistan volunteers!

**Safyan Jabbar**

**Gilgit Baltistan – Gilgit:** I was the focal person for ASER in GB, an area renowned for its breathtaking beauty and hilly terrain. The experience I want to share is when some of my colleagues went missing for a day in between travelling from far off areas to Skardu. The team of trainers, including 2 females were expected to arrive at 5:00 PM, and till midnight, there was no sign of them. There were no mobile signals on the route, which meant I could not contact them, despite my best efforts. Finally late at night they managed to call from a landline number explaining the cause of delay, their car broke at ASTAK.

I had to rescue the panicked team all by myself, as there was no one else around at that time of the night. After a haunted journey on completely empty roads right in the midst of forests and mountainous land, I was able to rescue my colleagues at the break of dawn.

This experience despite the difficulties taught me the importance of responsibility, team-work and going the extra mile to help ones colleagues. For this I will be eternally grateful to ASER.

**Husnain Astori**

**Islamabad Capital Territory:** This observation is from Phulgran, a village near Islamabad. During my school visit, I was taken aback by the information that the Head Teacher was not present as he had gone to attend a wedding ceremony. Meanwhile, people started gathering around me and started a plethora of complaints against the school. One old woman said that she had already filed complaints against the school faculty. However, all her complains had fallen on deaf ears. She grumbled that the Head teacher severely exploited their children, constantly bullying them for various favors. She added that last week they had given two bundles of husk (chaff) for animals to the head teacher on his demand, but he is still unsatisfied and was demanding more husk as tuition fee.



I hope that the ASER survey will go a long way in helping address the problems of these people, and that the government as well as the civil society organizations will take notice.

**Muhammad Imran**

**Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – D. I. Khan:** As a part of the ASER KP survey team, I visited D. I. Khan an area which has been a vicarious target of terrorism. What astonished me there was the sheer amount of out-of-school children in the place. Wow! I was astonished that even after the article 25-A, there are places where education is still a novelty. We visited a place called Gul Bara where the local tradition is to wear a Turban, so we were also given a piece of cloth to cover our heads. We also got to savor a specialty called PANDA in which the local people mix bread with the meat and then present it to the guests. I was astonished by how friendly the locals were, contrary to the media reports about the area being very inimical to outsiders. But then ASER is about dispelling myths through exposure to ground realities, and here I indeed found out new realities about D. I. Khan.

**Zaki Ullah**

**Punjab – Mianwali:** I want to share an experience with all of you from the village Chidru, a backward village located far east of Mianwali. Here during the ASER survey, as we were about to enter the school door we had to run for our lives and had to take refuge in a room because a fierce dog had started barking. After a while, a Maasi (maid) came to the rescue, and guided us to the school. Inside the school the scene was nothing short of scandalous. The cattle were tied in one end & the cotton was placed at the other. In the middle of such extremities were the children who did not even have any notion about their classrooms or grades. We were informed that the cattle in school were the property of the principal Sahiba (Madam). This also went on to explain presence of the dog that was there to guard her things!

Article 25-A says that education is the right of every child, but here in Mianwali we came to realize that maybe it is also a right of some animals!

**Sami Khan**

**Sindh – Thatta:** ASER 2011 has been a whirlwind of a ride. One experience that I would like to share comes from the cradle of Sindhi civilization, Thatta. Once a labyrinth of learning, the place today faces extreme hardship in terms of education. Here for the first time in my life, I found schools where the children did not even know what grade they belong to. And here among the Sindh heat despite the onset of November, I found the actual meaning of education deprivation.



In Thatta standing amidst the cradle of human civilization, and listening to folklores lamenting wisdom, glory and love, one actually cannot estimate the gravity of the detrimental conditions of education in the area. Seeing Thatta in its gory triviality with plethora of the uneducated, the deprived and so-called learned, I actually wondered how we can relive or revive our past glories. Or should we even do so? Before ASER, education conditions in Pakistan were mere statistics for me. However, here in Sindh I actually realized what these figures convey in real life.

**Rafeel Wasif**

**City district Karachi:** In comparison to the villages, households are difficult to access in the urban cities. One can simply walk in houses in villages but in case of urban areas such as Karachi, the first task is to convince the security guards or servants even before meeting any member of the family. Eventually then one has to persuade the head of the family to let the children of the household to be tested. One of the most interesting incident that I confronted was when a head of the family in Clifton, Karachi got extremely annoyed with the fact that we wanted to test his children for a literacy test, where as his children according to him were going to the best private school in the country and the name of the school in itself needed no further testimony for them being literate or not.

**Armaghan Rafay Khan**