

Stories from the field

Punjab – Nankana Sahib *Kamal Nawaz*

While travelling towards Nankana Sahib as the part of the ASER survey 2012, I was captivated by the holy structures on the way. Although Nankana is famous for its Gurdawara Janam Asthan; the area of Mariamabad (which holds an annual pilgrimage for Christians across the world) caught my attention the most. A towering statue of Mary stands tall over a hill revealing the existence of one of Pakistan's oldest Christian settlements. Even the teachers at the local government school were enthusiastic in informing about the rich history embedded in this area. Throughout this grueling ASER survey phase in Nankana Sahib a bit of history, a bit of culture worked as a perfect energizer for the volunteers. The participation of female volunteers in the survey was remarkable. Presence of female volunteers actually facilitated the survey as they were not only welcomed by the households but also families were more open to them in expressing their educational concerns. One of the village's elder even complained, 'one teacher running an entire school does not make any sense. This explains why my child's learning level is low in every subject. I don't know who keeps a check on these teachers but surely, they are not doing their job.'

This reflects the impact of ASER survey in spreading awareness amongst the parents regarding issues in education and the children's right to education. ASER is not just a report for the policymakers but also a platform for citizens where they can hold the education system accountable for its dissatisfactory deliverables.

Gilgit Baltistan - Skardu *Hasnain Astori*

ASER 2012 has reached out to 136 districts all across Pakistan. The sheer scale of the survey can be witnessed in the case of Gilgit Baltistan where some of the most remote settlements are located in areas inaccessible by road. In order to reach there our volunteers had to first go by jeep, then mule and finally by foot through the rugged unforgiving terrain. Mandial is a tiny settlement on the Pak-India border in Skardu district. When they reached the village in question which was located near the Pak-India border, they found that nearly half the residents had migrated due to poverty. The volunteers felt as if they had been taken back in time as most of the villagers had never seen many outsiders and had been living the same way for generations almost completely cut off from the rest of the world.

The findings were very disappointing with very low learning levels and no government school. The residents were overjoyed that an organization had taken an interest in their well being. This case shows not only the outreach of ASER but also that even a survey that is meant for learning levels can have so many other important functions and show many useful pieces of information.

