

# Every Home has Stories to Tell in ASER Pakistan

*a citizen led therapeutic learning survey*

Walking down the rubbish filled narrow streets of the Hazara mohalla in Malir District inhabited by the Hindko speaking community from Mansehra and Abbottabad in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), we turned to the next street following the fifth house anti-clockwise rule. We suddenly entered a gentrified patch with 2-3 marla homes; we knocked on the fifth house. I was excited to be on the spot check visit to see how the ASER app was working for the enumerators; how long would it take especially today when there was just one enumerator present. The door was opened by a young boy whose mother was clearly cooking a fried egg; we could hear the spluttering crisp sounds from the frying pan at 12:30 p.m.; this was breakfast for her husband waiting in the adjacent room. She asked us if she could cook one for us as well. We politely declined and shared the purpose of the visit in search of all 3-16 year old children in homes to inquire about their learning levels and also ask her questions too. She said ‘yes but you cannot take my photographs’, we immediately complied. It was a ‘Hindko’ mother tongue speaking home but she was clearly adept at ‘Karachi Urdu’ too. Karachi is a mega metropolis of migrants with sprawling urban slums, peri urban-rural communities speaking multiple languages and boasting



multiple cultures. A city that has always fascinated me by its diversity of languages and cultures.

We began with the HH profile segment of the questionnaire which provides a core context for the children's assessment. Every house has a story to tell with multiple layers, that is if you are looking for one. I am a diehard story gatherer whenever I am on a field visit.

She had five children, two daughters and three sons. The school going ones were three 11, 15, and 17 years old in grades 2, 8 and 10 respectively. This house was a recent acquisition as the previous rented one was inundated by the horrible flood waters in 2022 and all the furniture and fixtures were destroyed. She said 'those were bad times; first COVID-19, then those terrible rains and floods; we suffered income losses, we had to pull out the children, admit them to another school, at least the younger two; the older one continued as he was entering the final year of schooling; but these two suffered the disruption'. She went on to say " I am not educated formally, their dad is educated just up to grade 8 which he never completed. I do not remember where the children's birth registration certificates are, but I think that was done when they were born as was their immunization". As the information was being gathered a young kid appeared from the street asking for ice and she was immediately obliged by the daughter! I asked, "is she your relative?" She said 'no just from my neighborhood, whenever they need anything that I can help with, I always do so happily, these are hard times!"

She was a kind generous lady; it was an open house that cared for others in the community! "With the shifting of the house my daughter has yet to sort out her after school tuition, but the boys do partake in after school coaching; tuition is a must. We spend about Rs. 5000 per child on education and tuitions! Yes, it is a lot, but education is everything!"

The two children were being tested now with the tools on paper and the results were being fed on to the app. I saw that the enumerator moved from one segment to another for the household level questions. We could see that the 11 year old and still in grade 2 was having a tough time adding and reading. It was very sad to see him struggle after all the funds being spent on the child who must have lost years and/or repeated grades!

Mercifully the daughter in grade 8 was on top of the basic skills in literacy and numeracy! She looked tense, not because of the ASER tool but perhaps because of her mother sharing everything with us; actually my Ammi would do exactly the same, God bless her soul! Yes, we had quickly become our host's therapy buddies! She did not mind being cathartic and asked us what we can do to help her depression, anger and anxiety. "You see there was COVID, then the awful floods, then my beautiful sister died six months ago, she was like my daughter, I miss her intensely every moment, she was just a bit older to my eldest daughter who is 25 years old! A fortnight ago we had robbers in the house who stole our solar panels and other objects; I get scared of all untoward movements around;



please tell me what can I do so that I do not loose temper too often; I really do not mean to do that. I have been under treatment but with little effect". She clearly had no problems sharing her mental well-being challenges with strangers. I asked her "I hope you are not taking heavy drugs to relax", she said" no I only go to a homeopath". I then caught myself sharing ITA's publication "Anokha Bagh/ A Special Garden", a story about an angry arrogant Princess Mehru, authored by the famous psychiatrist/activist Dr. Ambreen Ahmed. The princess would lose her temper and then to calm down she was told to take deep breaths in and out, and count slowly up to 10". My new ASER 2023 Malir/Hazara friend repeated after me and said, "Yes this is very simple and very calming indeed; please stay on'

Her chatter went on incessantly; she even divulged that she was older than her husband who always wanted to marry her, but then she said 'You know, I do not like women who come and say we do not argue/fight with our husbands that has to be the biggest lie ever, as we quarrel all the time on little things and why not? "

We had clearly become good friends by the end of 35 minutes; if she could, she would have adopted me as a household member too; now she did not mind being photographed either!

ASER's magic, as a citizen led people friendly assessment tool is incredible. It uncovered, overage, low learning levels for a child who clearly needed help for foundational literacy and numeracy and the challenges of the mother who was acutely aware of her mental health problems but had also traumatized her



children, who were quiet not knowing what more she would divulge to complete strangers.

The ASER app worked smoothly and sequentially; however, I wondered if we could ask all the questions first from the mother/household member and then go to the children's learning segment, it would improve the flow of the survey, or perhaps not. How else could we have become the therapy friends for Naheed, nor heard all her woes, her displacement and robbery stories; her anxiety ridden face, which after 30 minutes had become all calm and smiling-she was very beautiful”.

We bid goodbye and began trekking down the narrow filth ridden streets one more time; suddenly we had come to the Allah Dad Baloch goth(village); no not in Balochistan province, still in Karachi as the fifth district of Sindh! We had actually traversed three provincial sub-cultures; three communities living in close proximity in the mega metropolis, from Sindh, KP and Balochistan belonging to multiple cultures, wealth groups and with multi-lingual migrant identities; where humanity was intact, but learning often remains contested, low and invisible! The ASER movement makes the invisible, visible.



Baela Raza Jamil  
ASER Field Notes  
November 10, 2023