

Choosing villages

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Sitting with a map of India, looking at the length and breadth of the country, mountains in the north, forests and ravines in the centre, densely populated plains, arid and thinly populated desert lands in the west, fertile belts in along the southern coasts ASER 2005 was to be a snapshot of the status of schooling and learning in the country; the effort reliably capturing the rich diversity of rural India.

How many villages should we go to in each district? How should these villages be chosen? Should the same strategy for choosing villages be used for remote sparsely peopled areas as they are for crowded and accessible regions? To reach deep into each district and spread wide across rural India, a large sample size was needed. If all districts in a state could not be done, would the districts that were done still count for something? But how large did the sample size need to be to generate reliable district level estimates so that the ASER report of each district level could represent the current schooling and learning experiences of children.

The search and the research began. Consulting sampling experts, meeting professors in universities, statisticians in research institutions, survey organizations, looking up Census of India, National Sample Survey, absorbing technical reports, statistics textbooks, weighing options and alternatives... finally decisions were taken.

Using villages lists from the 2001 census, villages were selected randomly within each district using probability proportional to size method of sampling (PPS)¹. Some villages were easily accessible by public transport, in other cases teams had to walk long distances to remote villages. Volunteers traveled for a day or more into the Thar desert in Rajasthan, in the mountains of Uttaranchal, and across jungles near the Myanmar border to survey villages. In a few cases, ASER teams needed security escort to venture into dangerous or disturbed areas. Only in rare or specific instances were villages or districts omitted from the survey; this typically happened because of security concerns, inaccessibility, or harsh weather.

The names on the map of India begin to assume great significance. These are places that we have to go to. There are so many names that do not show up on the map but we know they are there because they are on our village lists. Villages are being found. Small settlements and big villages; villages with scattered hamlet.....from Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari in the southern tip of the country to Leh and Kargil in Ladakh, Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu, to Tinsukia in Assam, East Siang in Arunachal and Kutch near the Arabian Sea.

509 rural districts participated in ASER 2005; data from 485 districts has been used in this report. More than 9521 villages across the country were visited.

¹MODE provided technical advice on sampling for ASER 2005. See annexure for technical details of sampling design.