

My Experience at ASER



Hi, my name is Mandi Boyce. I'm a university student in the U.S., studying political science at Arizona State University. I have traveled to India many times but this is the first trip during which I've taken the time to volunteer with a local NGO.

My experience at ASER has been a fantastic one, in which I've learned a great deal about the organization as well as education in India. One of the most valuable experiences was going into the field with new ASER associates in training.

Two ASER trainees and I went to the village of Rajpur in Uttar Pradesh to practice surveying children on their learning levels. People in the community were very nice and cooperative in letting us speak with their children. The kids were excited to show what they have learned. One trend I noticed in their learning level was a lack in their geographic knowledge of India. I was surprised that most children of in then ten households visited could not point out their state on a map of India. This is definitely an area that needs improvement across all schools (both private and government) and at all levels.

This trip was not only helpful to me in a technical way, however. It also helped me gain a deeper understanding of India in general. While I've traveled to the country three times before, I've never been to a village such as this. I feel it was important for me to do so to see how rural India lives. These villages are very different than anything in America.

One thing that struck me was when an ASER associate, Devyani, asked me if we had buffalo in our villages in America. It seemed like such an odd question because I realized there really isn't anything in America that we would refer to as a village any longer. The smallest communities are called towns, and there certainly aren't villages that are rural

like those in India. Most of the farming now in America is commercial; therefore the buffalo are commercially owned or wild. It was interesting to see that some people here may not realize that America no longer has such rural villages.

While we have no villages in America to compare to what I've seen here, I recently visited a similar village in a rural part of Ghana (a West African country on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea). These are similar, however, only in size and appearance. What I have discovered is that developmentally, the villages are in two separate stages. Many parents in the village in Ghana still do not see the value of education, particularly for girls. Boys usually do not go to school past grade eight or so. Most people there feel that as farmers, education is not needed for their day to day life, and is therefore unnecessary. It was very nice to see that here in India people put much more value in education. Parents are even willing and enthusiastic about sending their girls to school, which is very exciting. Hopefully, Ghana will one day become more like India in seeing that even in rural communities, children need education – girls included.

In light of this comparison, what I have seen so far in India is impressive and gives much hope for the future. Organizations like ASER are a big part of continuing this trend. ASER is unique and important in that it assesses the learning levels, and therefore effectiveness of schools all over the country. Hopefully the results of this annual survey will not be wasted by a lack of initiative from the states and the schools to improve.

Personally my time with ASER, although short, was very meaningful. It was excellent to meet many wonderful people that are so truly dedicated to their cause. It is very inspiring, and it would be great to continue my relationship with ASER and perhaps even come back to work with the organization for a longer period of time in the future.