

# Pratham – The Simplest Question in Education, Asked at Scale

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In 1994, Pratham began in Mumbai as a small programme to bring education to children in the city's slums. The founding question was straightforward: are children in schools actually learning anything? The answer, when they began systematically checking, was disturbing. Children who had spent four or five years in a government school could not read a simple sentence. Children who had passed Class III could not do two-digit subtraction. The schools existed. The teachers were present. The children were enrolled. And the learning was not happening.

This was the gap Pratham chose to address. Not access — India's school access problem has substantially improved. The learning gap. The silent crisis in which millions of children complete primary education unable to do the things primary education is supposed to teach them.

Thirty years later, Pratham is India's largest educational NGO. The Annual Status of Education Report — ASER — which Pratham produces, is the most important evidence document in Indian education policy. And the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology that Pratham developed is being replicated in countries across Africa and Asia.

## Who They Are

Pratham was founded in 1994 in Mumbai by Madhav Chavan and Farida Lambay in partnership with UNICEF. From a single city programme, it expanded across India — by 2024 working across 21 states, reaching millions of children and thousands of communities. They work through direct programming with children, capacity building of government teachers, and the ASER research programme that documents learning levels nationally.

Pratham's model reflects a specific view of what educational reform requires: not new schools, not more teachers, not more technology, but a radical reorientation toward whether children are learning the foundational competencies that all other learning depends on. Reading and basic arithmetic. The ability to decode a sentence. The ability to recognise place value.

## ASER: The Report That Changed Policy

The Annual Status of Education Report, produced by Pratham since 2005, conducts a large-scale household survey across rural India — testing children on simple reading and mathematics tasks, regardless of whether they are enrolled in school, and publishing the results. The survey is citizen-led: Pratham mobilises local volunteers to conduct surveys in sampled villages across 600 districts.

ASER's findings have been consistently uncomfortable. For years, they documented that a majority of Class V students in rural India could not read a Class II-level text. The 2023 ASER report (for rural India) found continued foundational learning gaps despite significant policy attention — though with some improvements in specific indicators.

The policy influence of ASER is measurable: it catalysed India's National Education Policy 2020's explicit foundational learning priority, the NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) programme targeting universal foundational literacy and numeracy by Class III, and the design of

multiple state-level remedial education programmes. A survey that costs a fraction of the national education budget has influenced spending and policy worth many multiples of its own cost.

## **Teaching at the Right Level: The Evidence**

TaRL — Teaching at the Right Level — is the pedagogical approach Pratham developed to address the learning gap ASER documented. Its core design: group children not by age or grade but by current learning level; teach each group at the level where they actually are rather than the level the curriculum assumes; and provide intensive, focused instruction in foundational skills until mastery.

The J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) evaluation of TaRL, conducted in collaboration with Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, produced some of the most cited results in global education research. The evaluated Pratham programme in Maharashtra showed substantial improvements in learning outcomes for participating children. A 2024 J-PAL review assessed the evidence across all TaRL evaluations as finding positive and significant effects on learning outcomes, with effect sizes that place TaRL among the most effective educational interventions evaluated globally.

Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee received the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics, in part for work that included the Pratham evaluation. This is an unusual credential for a civil society organisation — having contributed to research that earned a Nobel Prize.

## **The Scale of Reach**

Pratham's direct programme reach in a given year varies by programme type. Their cumulative reach across three decades — through direct programming, government partnerships, and the ASER survey infrastructure — runs into hundreds of millions of interactions with children, teachers, and communities across India.

The TaRL methodology has been adopted by governments in multiple Indian states as official remedial education policy. Internationally, TaRL Africa — a sister organisation

implementing the methodology in Sub-Saharan African contexts — has adapted and evaluated TaRL approaches in Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, and other countries.

## What Pratham Means for Odisha

Odisha's foundational learning outcomes, documented through successive ASER surveys, reflect the national pattern: enrollment has increased significantly, but a substantial proportion of enrolled children are not meeting grade-level learning standards, particularly in reading and arithmetic. The NIPUN Bharat programme targets addressing this by Class III — and the TaRL methodology is among the most evidence-supported approaches available for the remedial education component.

Odisha's tribal children — particularly those in Scheduled Tribe-majority blocks where the home language is different from Odia — face the specific foundational learning challenge that Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) approaches address alongside TaRL. The JaBaSu TaRL Implementation Practice Note draws directly on Pratham's methodology for application in Odisha's context.

## Contact and Further Reading

**Website:** [pratham.org](https://pratham.org) | **ASER:** [asercentre.org](https://asercentre.org) | **TaRL Africa:** [teachingattherightlevel.org](https://teachingattherightlevel.org)

### Key evidence:

- ASER 2023 (Rural): [asercentre.org](https://asercentre.org) — most recent learning level assessment across 600 districts
  - J-PAL evidence review: evaluation history of TaRL and Pratham remedial education programmes
  - Pratham Annual Reports: [pratham.org](https://pratham.org) — programme scale and reach documentation
  - NIPUN Bharat programme documentation: links Pratham's TaRL influence to national policy
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