Self-work and Apprenticeship: Reflections on an Ethnography of Monitoring and Evaluation in Rural India[1]

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Abstract: The *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) publicly reports on the quality of India's rural primary education system and its children's basic learning levels across all states; ASER is produced via a groundbreaking model for citizen-engaged monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This chapter describes my ethnography of the ASER M&E effort via field observation, interviews, and document data, which I collected in several Indian states as a doctoral candidate. For researchers of educational M&E efforts, observing these data being collected in the field can unveil unique discoveries as these methods well position researchers to distinctively investigate the cultural and contextual issues that influence M&E. Thorough analysis of culture and context has long been associated with the strengths of ethnographic work in education and governance. In keeping with the focus of this edited volume, I do not present my study's findings, but rather discuss the development of my ASER study and explain key issues that arose in my ethnographic work: my positionality, research preparation, cultural competence, self-work, apprenticeship, and fieldwork dilemmas. In this chapter, I aim to illuminate how the researcher—as the main instrument in ethnographic work—must routinely assess themselves, carefully prepare for cross-cultural work, and continuously reckon with their limitations and emerging fieldwork dilemmas. I also describe how consistent self-work and fieldwork apprenticeships facilitate the researcher's bicultural understanding of the phenomenon under study. The chapter is a reflection afforded by time—the insights gleaned from a decade of thinking about the meaning and experience of my ASER fieldwork.

Keywords: positionality, monitoring and evaluation, cultural competence, researcher responsibility, cross-cultural fieldwork

This chapter describes the ethnography of a national monitoring and evaluation effort in India called the *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER). ASER is a groundbreaking model for citizen-engaged monitoring and evaluation developed by Indian civil society leaders (ASER Centre, 2015; Banerji, 2013; Banerji et al., 2013; Goodnight, 2017b).[2] The ASER model

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[2] This chapter uses the joint term *monitoring and evaluation*. In so doing, I treat monitoring and evaluation as interrelated activities fulfilling multiple purposes in covering the broad use of data to (a) make judgments about the quality, worth, or equity of a large-scale system or program, (b) assist with decision-making for the improvement of a system or program, (c) monitor changes or incremental progress toward established goals for the system or program, and (d) foster deeper learning about the system or program across various groups of people with a stake in it. See Goodnight, 2017b, pp. 43-48 for a longer explanation of why I define ASER as a monitoring and evaluation effort serving multiple purposes. I argue that ASER utilizes surveys and assessments as its main methods for data collection but is not simply a survey or assessment.

generates large-scale data and promotes widespread awareness about the status of India's rural education system. Over the course of roughly 10 months, a massive grassroots data collection process results in a widely publicized ASER report. Under the principle that citizens have rights within a democracy to independently evaluate their public systems, ASER is conducted independently from the Government of India by the Delhi-based nongovernmental organization, Pratham. Pratham's research and assessment unit, ASER Centre, conducts ASER. To evaluate primary education and children's learning across all rural districts in India, ASER Centre relies upon roughly 25,000 volunteers and over 500 partner organizations to collect data in more than 16,000 villages in a one-year cycle. ASER's execution involves citizens as volunteer data collectors and partner organizations as skilled facilitators of ASER—the organizations' staff members typically taking on the role of ASER Master Trainers, ensuring quality of the training and data collection. Recruited from each rural district of India, partner organizations can be university departments, non-governmental and community-based organizations, or government-run district teacher training centers.

During data collection, volunteers conduct village mapping, government school surveys, and household-based surveys and learning tests with children (5-16 years old). To prepare volunteers and partner organizations to execute ASER, ASER Centre staff engage in a tiered, multistate training effort that provides substantial support to partner organizations and volunteers in developing the technical, organizational, and relational skills necessary to accurately collect data and test children in villages. The training phase of each ASER cycle reflects a colossal exercise in decentralized evaluation capacity building. For 10 years (2005–2014), the ASER data collected by these volunteers and partners provided the only routine, publicly available information on Indian children's basic learning levels. Today, ASER is conducted every two years and still provides essential data for governance and academic studies of education in India.[3] ASER data connects children's learning levels to their school enrollment, gender, and household affluence, providing a clearer picture of important factors in Indian children's acquisition of basic learning skills in reading, math, and English language.

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[3] I am referring here to the version of ASER that assesses basic or foundational learning, which was originally created in 2004 and for 10 years ran annually (until 2014), but which now is conducted every two years. Technically, a version of ASER is still conducted every year, but every other year it focuses on competencies that are "beyond basics."

Given India's immense cultural, linguistic, and geographical diversity as well as its political complexities,[4] the ASER model's effectiveness is deeply rooted in the abilities of its partner organizations and volunteers: they are recruited locally with an emphasis on their experiential, relational, and sociocultural competency in carrying out ASER's data collection (Goodnight, 2017b, 2022). Consequently, the effectiveness of ASER relies heavily on the ASER Centre staff to recruit, train, and support these volunteers and partners in executing ASER well. To further consider the relationship between context, culture, and the quality of data that is ultimately collected in ASER, imagine the following scenario:

An anxious headmaster is worried about the repercussions of unflattering data being collected from his rural school. Many children are absent that day, especially from the lower grades—monsoon rains falling continuously for the last week have made walking to the school on the clay roads or traveling by motorbike very difficult. Despite her assurances that the data will be anonymized and aggregated in the ASER report, the headmaster forbids the young ASER volunteer data collector from following her specified protocol. The ASER protocol requires her to take headcounts of students and teachers from each grade's classroom via her direct observation. This protocol allows her to verify actual student and teacher attendance at the school (for that one day). In her data form for ASER, the headcounts are supposed to be recorded alongside the school's official student enrollment and teacher appointment records. Because of the headmaster's refusal, the ASER volunteer has missing headcount data for all the classrooms (for which she is not granted permission to observe); she additionally cannot observe whether the classes are being taught multigrade, or whether the teachers have a usable

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[4] To quickly summarize the political complexities of contemporary India is an impossibility—these complexities are defined by its immense diversity and extraordinary history. In this fool's errand, I lean upon one of India's preeminent historians, Ramchandra Guha. The opening sentences of his prologue, entitled "Unnatural Nation," for his nearly 900-page account of India's history post-independence (after 1947) states: "Because they are so many, and so various, the people of India are also divided" (Guha, 2007, p. 1). He further explains that this nation of linguistically-carved states (as culturally varied as the countries of Europe) navigates constant internal social conflict along five axes—caste, language, religion, class, and gender (Guha, 2007). Since Guha's writing (nearing 20 years ago), India has become a nation with mounting communal and regional tensions (particularly regarding religion) as well as acute erosions in democratic norms and freedoms under the decade-long leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Agrawal, 2024). Nevertheless, Guha's observations about India's extraordinariness as a democratic project are still true for now: "that India is still a single nation… and that it is still largely democratic—these are what should compel our deeper attention" because there are not just forces that divide India but also moderating ones that keep it together as an unlikely and remarkable democracy (p. 11). In my research on ASER in India, I have investigated the role of its citizen-engaged monitoring and evaluation effort in agitating for equitable and quality education in India. I have asked how such evaluation efforts influence citizens' sense of responsibility toward and ownership of the government education system—an essential system in sustaining Indian democracy.

blackboard. Fortunately, the headmaster does cooperate in answering the ASER volunteer's questions about official student enrollments, teacher appointments, and serving the free daily midday meal. He even leads her to observe the school's operational and unlocked toilets. She verifies that the school's handpump is working to offer clean drinking water, and she notes the existent playground—all information which she records on her form.[5] *Still, she imagines later returning to her supervisor, the ASER Master Trainer, with an explanation of the headmaster's interference and her missing data. From her training, the volunteer knows that too many of these incidences of missing data could jeopardize the district's and state's inclusion in the final report. Missing data presents data quality and interpretation problems for ASER. Eventually, she succumbs to pressure from the headmaster, and while still sitting in his school office, she records some numbers he offers her for the missing classrooms, presumably from his written daily attendance sheets. He watches her carefully as she fills in the missing data on her form. After leaving the school site, the ASER volunteer is deflated. Finally, she decides to erase the figures provided by the headmaster for the classrooms—Afterall, she did not directly observe them as required. She feels uneasy about the missing data and its potential consequences for her ASER Master Trainer, but she is also thinking about the values emphasized in her ASER training last month: it is important to get true data, follow all the protocols, and be honest about challenges.*

This scenario is a brief composite story constructed from the field observation, interview, and document data I collected as a doctoral candidate during my ethnographic study of ASER. This scenario highlights circumstances that can lead to potentially problematic educational data produced for ASER. The scenario unveils several cultural and contextual dynamics that may influence the actions of the headmaster and ASER volunteer. For instance, there is potentially a broader cultural dynamic at play wherein educational data collection processes (and their resulting data) are understood to be useless or poor (Goodnight, 2022).[6] Arguably, a lacking

[5] Over time, ASER Centre added additional indicators to the school survey form for ASER volunteers to observe and document. These indicators about toilets, drinking water, playgrounds and so on indicate the school's compliance with key provisions of India's Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009. RTE was passed to ensure all Indian children's equitable access to free quality primary education by articulating universal standards and norms, including ones pertaining to adequate school facilities (For more information, see Government of India, Ministry of Education, n.d.: https://dsel.education.gov.in/rte).

[6] One significant example of poor educational data has been the primary education system data collected by India's district governments called the District Information System for Education (DISE) data. DISE data, historically, was not portrayed as trustworthy or accurate—even by the main government body that reported it, the National University of Education Planning and Administration (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; National University of Education Planning and Administration, 2013).

seriousness in producing accurate data has pervaded educational governance in India.[7] Nevertheless, a new accountability culture has gradually taken root across the country wherein there are increasing downward accountability pressures on people who deliver and manage government services to signal good performance of job duties and appropriate use of resources through documentation and enumeration (Gupta, 2012). Such requirements are not necessarily accompanied by the needed fiscal and human resources to fulfill them. Consequently, in the contemporary governance of social sectors in India like education, local officials and sector workers, such as school headmasters, feel pressure to signal data compliance (by giving data) but also perhaps to skirt data accuracy (by not offering true data) if their enumeration reflects poor outcomes.[8] Officials and workers can perceive risks in job security or continued resources in having no data to offer or in submitting negative data to authorities or supervisors, who are further up in the governance hierarchy. The logic is that missing data or poor data (i.e., indicating low performance or noncompliance) can get a person reprimanded or dismissed for inadequately fulfilling the duties of a position. These fears can outweigh incentives to admit truthful circumstances: perhaps, that no data have been kept or that data collected reflect problematic educational quality, access, or provision in their jurisdictions or schools.

Other cultural dynamics shaping this scenario may be more specific to these two people and their negotiation of their respective identities and circumstances. Nonetheless, these interactions can also reveal broader cultural values and norms regarding deference to authority and respect for social hierarchy. The headmaster is in a position of authority within the school and has some power as the person possessing the data. He can essentially regulate access to the data. The ASER volunteer is in the headmaster's professional setting and requesting his

[7] One ASER architect described India as having a lacking "measurement culture" wherein there is "not widespread understanding of how to 'use large-scale evidence to inform decision-making'" (Goodnight, 2017a, p. 122).

[8] Across states, a weighty regime of inspection, documentation, and enumeration defines many bureaucratic and social sector jobs in India, including in education. Such a regime is intended to combat corruption and ensure accountability with finances and policy implementation. As an example, see Akhil Gupta (2012)'s illuminating descriptions of this regime and its effects on rural early childhood education and maternity health workers, *Anganwadi* workers, in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh. Gupta describes the stress of the workers' data keeping responsibilities and the performative quality and arbitrariness that defines the essence of these tasks from the workers' perspectives. The enumeration requirements also assume mathematical competencies that some Anganwadi workers do not have. Such an environment of documentation and enumeration across Indian governance creates a culture where data and records appear cumbersome and ridiculous rather than reasonable and useful in the course of people's work and decision-making. Thus, in scenarios like ASER data collection, where records are important and figures could potentially aid officials' decision-making and foster greater transparency with the Indian public, it can be hard to dispel people's cynicism and fear to motivate their cooperation in offering truthful data, especially if they suspect those data might reflect badly on their work.

cooperation. The headmaster is also an older man, which could aid in his self-confidence in dictating to the young ASER volunteer what data she should record and by what means. While the ASER volunteer may feel somewhat intimidated and disempowered in the interaction for reasons of gender, age, and professional setting, she carries some institutional authority too. She is a trained data collector for Pratham—an increasingly well-known educational non-governmental organization—and she bears a letter from Pratham (i.e., ASER Centre) requesting cooperation and support for collecting data in this district. This institutional authority bolsters her position to ask for help and challenge noncompliance from this elder. Also, according to ASER protocols, the volunteer has recently visited the elected head of the village, the *Sarpanch*, in which the school is located. The Sarpanch gave her his support to conduct ASER in the area. Thus, an additional contextual and cultural dynamic is the preservation of a good relationship between the Sarpanch and school headmaster who must live in the same place and work together long after the volunteer leaves.

For researchers of educational monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts, observing data being collected in the field can unveil unique discoveries. For example, differences in adherence to prescribed data collection methods due to contextual factors at educational sites or cultural dynamics between participants (e.g., volunteer and headmaster) can undermine the overall quality of these data. This commonplace ASER scenario described above—an ASER volunteer working to build trust with a headmaster and collect data from the government school—is duplicated roughly 16,000 times in a single cycle of ASER and yet, it is only from the ground that one can genuinely appreciate the significance of the negotiation and relationship that is forged. It is only over time and the observation of several instances that the nuances of those relationships and negotiations can emerge. Moreover, it is only in observing the full ASER process from recruitment, to training, to data collection, and dissemination that one can holistically understand the importance of and relationship between the elements. In this scenario, the ASER volunteer's strong training in specific values of truthfulness regarding field problems and strong commitment to correct data mattered in her decision-making in the face of other pressures. For the ethnographer of M&E, prolonged field observation reveals the tangible connections between context, culture, and educational data.

In this chapter, I describe my use of ethnography to study ASER's citizen-engaged M&E effort across several Indian states. My study rests on the premise that ethnographic methods well

position researchers to investigate the cultural and contextual issues influencing M&E (Goodnight, 2022, 2023). Thorough analysis of culture and context has long been associated with the strengths of ethnographic work in the areas of education (Anderson-Levitt, 2012; Thapan, 2014) evaluation (Butler, 2016; Fetterman, 1984; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), and governance (Gupta, 2012). In keeping with the focus of this edited volume, my chapter does not report main findings from my ethnographic study. Instead, the chapter explains key issues that arose in my ethnographic study: positionality, cultural competence, self-work, research preparation, apprenticeship, and fieldwork dilemmas. The next section gives a brief introduction to the concepts of cultural competence and self-work as they are discussed in the evaluation field's literature.

Cultural Competence and Self-Work

"Evaluators must work hard in preparing to enter a community, neighborhood, or organization; they have a responsibility to educate themselves. CRE [culturally responsive evaluation] requires particular attention to the context in which an evaluation will be conducted. This includes the history of the location, the program, and the people." (Hood et al., 2015)

Due in good part to the scholarship of evaluation theorists who have developed culturally responsive evaluation (e.g., Chouinard & Cram, 2020; Hood, 1998; Hood et al., 2015; Hopson, 2009; LaFrance et al., 2012), the evaluation field is increasingly focused on issues of culture in evaluation and the cultural competence of evaluators (American Evaluation Association, 2011; SenGupta et al., 2004). M&E—an area of the evaluation field's work—should be included in the scope of discussions about the significance of culture in inquiry. Culture is understood as the values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors that are shared among a group of people; culture is created and acquired through co-learning and prolonged interaction (Hood et al., 2015). Culture essentially influences the character and conduct of evaluations because it is impossible for evaluators to design a culture-free evaluation—bereft of values or norms—and it is equally impossible for people to leave their cultural understandings and practices at the door when participating in an evaluation (Hood et al., 2015; SenGupta et al., 2004). Drawing upon intersectionality theories, evaluation scholars can understand the complexities of cultural analysis and people's multiple cultural affiliations and participations (see Hall, 2023; Goodnight,

Ch. 1). Cultural affiliations and individuals' identities are not fixed, and the salience of different cultural markers and cultural ways of being changes with context and circumstances (Chouinard, 2013). To more fully address culture in evaluation, evaluators must be responsive to how culture and identity interface with privilege and power in particular contexts (Hall, 2020). This cultural responsiveness includes being educated about the specific histories of communities with a stake in the evaluation and the histories of the entities being evaluated (Kirkhart, 2010). Regarding ASER, I have argued elsewhere, based on my ethnographic data, that their cultural knowledge, methodological training, and deep experience in Indian education (and policymaking) allowed the architects of ASER—Drs. Rukmini Banerji, Madhav Chavan, and Wilima Wadhwa—to create its successful M&E process (Goodnight, 2022). Their sensitivity to the cultural, linguistic, sociopolitical, and geographical specificity of Indian districts, gleaned through their years of education development work across the country, guided their decision-making to use local volunteers and partner organizations in ASER.

To become cross-culturally competent and aware of power in a CRE sense, evaluators must continuously work on themselves: their reflexivity, their interpersonal skills, and their understanding of social justice principles (Goodnight, Ch. 1). Stafford Hood (n.d.) emphasized that, as educational researchers and evaluators, you have a continuing obligation to "keep working on yourself" because you "don't leave yourself at home, you bring yourself when you do that work" (Frazier-Anderson et al., 2023, 23:35). You bring along your values and experiential knowledge, your interpersonal skills, your capacity to analyze problems, and your methodological training—they are your toolkit and your baggage when you go out into the world to produce knowledge. Hood (2004) was morally courageous and humble in his assessment of his personal, ongoing obligation as an evaluator to be culturally responsive and *responsible* to the people he engaged with and served through his evaluations:

> My personal journey to understand the role of culture in program evaluation . . . will be nothing less than a lifelong endeavor—as it should be. I can find no logical explanation as to why our evaluations should not be culturally responsive or why we should not behave in culturally responsible ways in our work as evaluators. (Hood, 2004, p. 35)

One important way that evaluators fulfill their responsibility is by constantly meditating on evaluation's purpose as a *service* that moves society toward greater democracy and social justice (Greene, 2021, as cited in Goodnight & Avent, 2023; Hall et al., 2023). A unique privilege—an

authority—accompanies the profession of evaluation, and evaluators' associated responsibility is to exercise this privilege carefully through "practicing reflexively" (Hall, 2020, p. 29)—searching for their own biases and cultural preferences via memoing and asking themselves routinely critical questions about the values embedded in their evaluation practices. Methodologically, in recognition of their privilege and responsibility, evaluators must represent the intersecting and diverse stories enmeshed in evaluations with greater depth and humanity—with "a more personal voice" (Hall, 2020, pp. 29–30). Ethnography provides a vital philosophical-methodological pathway toward practicing reflexively and representing evaluation stories responsibly with detail that highlights (a) the complexity of educational systems or programs and (b) the humanity of people within them. Ethnographic methods can deepen evaluators' cultural competence and sustain evaluators' self-work. In investigating M&E and its consequences, I have similarly argued that culture and context are important dimensions (Goodnight, 2023). Thus, in my research on M&E, my cultural competence and self-work are similarly important. In the rest of this chapter, I discuss the development and implementation of my ASER study, while describing my positionality, research preparation, cultural competence, and self-work as key issues in my ethnographic work.

My Positionality and Cultural Competence in India

My positionality has implications for the theory framing this study and the life experiences and cultural position I draw upon as foundations for this work. My positionality as a White, American, English-speaking, economically and educationally privileged researcher shaped my research project on ASER and the data I collected in ways I recognize and in ways I am unaware. Additionally, my identity at the time of the research as a 30-something unmarried woman with no children also surely influenced how I related to people during my research while it reminded me of the bidirectionality of one's researcher identity. These latter aspects of my identity are ones that I less routinely scrutinized in my initial assessment of my knowledge, skills, and overall ability to conduct this research, and yet, they too were ultimately significant factors in how I presented myself and in how I was being constructed by other people in the contexts in which I did my research. Thus, while I was actively trying to mediate aspects of my identity and skill limitations that I thought were issues in relating to people and conducting my

research ethically, other people were also agents in my research, adjusting to who they thought I was, what they thought I wanted and understood, and what they interpreted were my needs related to data and often, to my well-being. The following sections provide a narrative of how I began my work in India, what I did to prepare myself for the research and develop the study, and how I assessed my cultural competence.

Beginning work in India

The summer before I began my doctoral program in education at the University of California Los Angeles (2011), I was a volunteer teacher at a foundation-run, primary and secondary residential school in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu that was created to serve children from acutely marginalized families based on their caste and ethnic backgrounds as well as their economic circumstances. At the time, I was interested in cross-cultural and cross-national approaches to working for social justice in education—its achievement through classroom pedagogy and its improvement through broader efforts to extend access to high-quality education for historically marginalized communities. In preparation for this teaching, I began independently studying India's education system; its history from colonization through independence and current democracy; and the diversity of its citizenry and the different states that had been formed largely along the lines of ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. The following summer (2012), I conducted early childhood education research in schools in two rural districts of Rajasthan as a qualitative research intern with Ambedkar University, and I had also been studying two languages spoken by large communities in India: Hindi and Urdu. Hindi is one of two official national languages of India (English being the other).

Developing the ASER Study

I learned about ASER at a paper session facilitated by one of ASER's architects at the Comparative and International Education Society conference in the spring of 2012. I had just finished teaching in southern India the summer before; I was increasingly aware of the complexity of educational discrimination and privilege in India—how Indian children's various sociocultural identities (e.g., caste, linguistic, ethnic, gender, regional, and age) paired with their specific circumstances (e.g., economic status and rural habitation) tended to influence their educational opportunities and outcomes. I started to wonder if a process like ASER could help

improve education in such a large, diverse, and complex democracy. I was also fascinated by the vision of ASER: ordinary people coming together to measure and share information that shaped the public education system, influencing the lives of all Indians. I wanted to see how ASER worked and if it worked. Given that ASER is so big, I realized that determining how and if it works would be quite complicated. Over time, I grasped that the answer to those questions is both an issue of perspective and context, and of course, across India, there is nothing if not a diversity of perspectives and contexts. Thus, as I was planning the study over the next two years, I was often asking myself: what can it do to capture some slice of that diversity? This question guided the methodological choices I made and that I explain in the following sections of this paper. Ultimately, I chose four very different contexts in which to conduct the study with the intention of asking many people in each place their perspective on ASER and on education in India.

In 2013, I attended my first ASER national training in the state of Bihar, observing the assembly of all of ASER's state teams from across the country for one week of workshops on how to execute ASER in the field and teach others how to do it. That summer, I was also based at ASER Centre in Delhi, assisting the organization in a teacher evaluation study with data collection in government schools in Bihar. These research opportunities allowed me to learn more about ASER's philosophy and process, as well as the organization and staff members that make ASER possible. Additionally, I gained greater cultural knowledge and competence in navigating a new state through fieldwork and in interfacing with ASER Centre staff members who come from every state of India and are themselves fieldworkers. With a Fulbright-Nehru Student Research Grant award for 2014–2015, I returned to India to conduct fieldwork for my dissertation, which was paired with a Critical Language Enhancement Award for further Hindi language training. Thus, before beginning my ethnography of ASER, I began a six-month intensive Hindi language program that built upon two years of prior language training in Hindi and Urdu. Also, it was important that I had spent months previously conducting research and teaching in three states (Delhi, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu) in which I would concentrate my study of ASER because of the relationships and cultural knowledge it allowed me to draw upon. Finally, my ethnographic study drew upon my understanding of ASER's organizational culture and approach to social inquiry that I developed during a previous summer: I had the experience of being embedded with ASER staff as part of the research team to design a teacher evaluation

process, and I had already observed one phase of the capacity-building activities for an earlier cycle of ASER.

Reflecting on Positionality, Responsibility, and Methodological Strategies

In methodological notes for the ASER study, which I previously published (Goodnight, 2022), I described the relationship between how I conceptualized my positionality, my cultural competence, and the methodological strategies that I have employed in my work.

> I have spent the last decade in some combination of teaching in, conducting fieldwork in, learning the languages and history of, living in, and researching India. While these have been essential activities for building my cultural competence, the duration and breadth of this experience does not afford me the same understanding as people who identify and live as Indian. (Goodnight, 2022, p. 11).

While these activities gradually provided me with some emic or "insider" understandings of schooling in rural India and collecting data via ASER fieldwork, many of my analyses of ASER were etic—drawing on my "outsider" perspective and the theories and methodologies gleaned from my training in the fields of evaluation and comparative education. I believed "my employment of critical or equity-focused theories, qualitative methods, and research reflexivity" was crucial to the trustworthiness of my work and to my sense of integrity as a researcher (Goodnight, 2022, p. 11). However, I knew my use of theory and methods could not ameliorate all my conceptual and social limitations in my design and conduct of this study. Drawing on Maxwell's (2013) guidelines for validity in conducting qualitative work (pp. 126–128), I wrote the following about my methodological strategies in studying ASER:

> My decisions throughout the research process have considered my positionality, understanding, and skill; I have strived to strengthen this study's trustworthiness through a) "intensive, long-term involvement" with participants in the process of conducting ASER, b) collecting rich data from a diversity of participants, c) acknowledging my researcher presence and activities as an "intervention" wherein I can test my ideas and share interpretations with other people, and d) triangulating data across many data collection strategies. (Goodnight, 2022, p. 11)

In summary, in endeavoring to conduct my study of ASER reflexively and humbly, I nurtured my hope that, despite my limitations, the scholarship I produced could make a meaningful

contribution to discussions about equity in Indian education, ASER's influence, and the consequences of M&E data. My dedication to working on myself—my cultural competence, my historical understanding, and my conceptualization of equity—has been undoubtedly essential in my study of ASER. As a cultural outsider, I prepared myself as best I could for field-based work and to use most effectively the ethnographic methods that seemed best attuned to the questions I wanted to investigate.

Developing the ASER Study

My ethnography was the first in-depth investigation of ASER's design and the only study to analyze ASER as a form of M&E. I conducted a ten-month ethnographic study of ASER (Summer 2014 to Spring 2015) for my doctoral dissertation, including extensive fieldwork in the Indian states of Delhi, Rajasthan, Manipur, and Tamil Nadu with shorter periods of fieldwork and interviewing in other states (e.g., Maharashtra and Telangana). The four primary states were chosen for the following reasons: (a) familiarity and cultural competence—I had either previously conducted research or taught in three of the states; (b) significance—particularly Delhi was the location of the national headquarters for ASER activities; and (c) maximum variation (Tracy, 2019)—the states represented different cultural and linguistic regions of India (North, South, and East) as well as diversity according to several key educational indicators like gender equity (in enrollment and grade-level achievement), private schooling rates, and scores on ASER's basic learning tests.

The questions that animated my study highlighted the complexity and breadth of M&E efforts; they were about (a) the origins of ASER, (b) the goals, values, and theory of change underlying ASER, (c) the ways ASER's design works in practice, (d) the ways ASER is influenced by its different contexts and diversity of participants, (e) the reasons people participate in ASER, (f) the broader social meaning of ASER, and (g) the effects ASER is having in India and beyond. To investigate these questions well, I realized that I would need to analyze ASER as entangled within a broader system that operated at different levels. I needed to engage ASER *vertically* (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006)—with attention to ASER's embeddedness in global educational dynamics and policy; in Indian national politics and history; and in state-level and district-level sociocultural, political, and geographical specificities. I also

understood the value of studying ASER comparatively, *horizontally* (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006), in multiple states with very different cultures, languages, histories, and sociopolitical circumstances. Given my training in the field of comparative education where preparation in a place's past, its people's collective memories and understandings, and its individuals' experiences of belonging, marginalization, and empowerment over time were regarded as important, I knew I must not proceed a-historically but instead *transversely* (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2009, 2014; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006) with the richest historical foundation I could establish in Indian politics, philosophy, and democracy related to my topic of study.

As part of the data collection, I interviewed government officials, Indian academics and educational experts, ASER's architects, ASER central and state staff members, partner organizations, and volunteers. Also, I observed the phases of the ASER process, including trainings, village mapping, testing in households, surveying in schools, and disseminating data in Rajasthan, Manipur, and Tamil Nadu. In addition to months of participant observation, the research produced over 90 semi-structured interviews and collected hundreds of primary documents, ranging from ASER training manuals and technical reports to Government of India reports and proceedings that referenced ASER data. I have since conducted follow-up observations of ASER in 2016 and remained in periodic contact with ASER Centre former and current staff about its ongoing development. Using these data, my studies of ASER have examined its design, its history and sociopolitical context, and the influence ASER is having domestically and globally.

Conceptualizing Ethnography

Ethnography has the flexibility and comprehensiveness as a methodology to collect data that contribute to understanding the breadth of inquiry activities and interactions that fall under M&E. I believe that taking a disciplinary-specific or narrow view of ethnography eliminates its range of possibilities; rather, ethnography can be seen as a "broad umbrella" methodology incorporating many qualitative methods that illuminate and document "social and cultural life" (Coffey, 2018, p. 2). It is this range that well positions ethnography to study evaluation's facets. My approach to ethnography is in keeping with its "complex history" as a methodology that has been frequently "reinterpreted and recontextualized" while developing across multiple social

science disciplines and fields (e.g., anthropology, sociology, geography, cultural studies, and education) (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 1–2). It is helpful to note evaluation's multidisciplinary development, contributing to its breadth as well. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) highlight ethnography's fluidity—with "no hard and fast boundaries" (p. x) with the rest of qualitative research but rather "considerable overlap with . . . 'qualitative inquiry', 'fieldwork', 'interpretive method', and 'case study'" (p. 1).

With all that said, proceeding with a working definition of ethnography for this study of M&E was helpful, and I appreciate Tedlock's (2000) description:

> Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. . . . [I]t combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives. (p. 455)

Tedlock highlights ethnography's attempt to present information in a situated way with a rich depiction of context while also emphasizing ethnography's quality as an involved and protracted form of inquiry—ethnographic fieldwork usually takes several months to several years to complete. She further states that "a key assumption [of ethnography] has been that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or other) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of their subjects" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 456). Ethnography's approach—of extended fieldwork aimed at observing people engaged in their ordinary activities within their natural environments—uniquely positions ethnographers to deeply comprehend others' perspectives and actions. At the same time, some researchers have questioned how the conditions of globalization have altered the effectiveness of ethnography and, specifically, whether the fullness of social relations can be deduced through prolonged observations of everyday lives embedded in particular places (Gille & Ó Riain, 2002). Gille and Ó Riain (2002) highlight the need for a *global ethnography*, which accommodates globalization's destabilization of the embeddedness of social relations that no longer operate neatly within recognizable units of analysis, such as the community, state, nation, and region, but rather crisscross between levels forming complicated webs of co-construction. Global ethnography does not rely solely on "the classic ethnographic strategy of being there" (p. 274) to understand culture and human interaction, but rather it seeks to creatively adopt "'a

global sense of place'" (Gille & Ó Riain, 2002, p. 377, quoting Massey, 1994) that simultaneously searches for explanation beyond the immediate ethnographic site.

Focusing the Ethnographic Study of ASER

In my study, what people shared about their lived experiences doing ASER was a pathway to understanding the collective social phenomenon of ASER as an M&E effort. From my point of view, the shift in emphasis from human lives (Tedlock, 2000) to human experiences of a shared phenomenon is the intellectual bending of ethnography that was necessary for its use in researching ASER. This reshaping of ethnography did not require my abandoning the features identified as intrinsic to the methodology. I found that the orientation and activities of the ethnographer can remain largely unchanged in the study of M&E. In my ASER study, I still

- studied the "actions and accounts" of people in "everyday contexts;"
- focused generally "on a few cases . . . to facilitate in-depth study;"
- gathered data from a variety of sources, but participant observation and informal conversations (unstructured interviews) as well as semi-structured interviews were key sources;
- collected data in a relatively "unstructured," "open-ended," and "exploratory" way by not following a "fixed" research plan and by allowing for the discovery of themes and emergent categories during observation, interviews, and conversations;
- interpreted the "meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

What about the concept of *culture* and its relationship to how I understood my study's purpose? Geertz (1973) offers a constructivist reading of culture as the "webs of significance" that people spin for themselves and in which they are suspended (p. 5). According to Geertz, ethnography is the analysis of those individuals' cultural webs and is "therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p. 5). In my study of ASER, I pursued such interpretivism by seeking to understand people's personal and shared webs of significance regarding ASER. My objective was to interpret their observable

actions doing ASER, or during ASER activities, as tied to their expressed values, perceptions of ASER's meaning, and the rationales that they directly shared for their actions.

Connecting Evaluation and Ethnography

As Chapter 1 of this volume details, many scholars have made connections between ethnography and evaluation (e.g., Fetterman, 1984; Wolcott, 1984). Fetterman (1984) advocated using ethnography as a methodology for conducting educational evaluations. According to him, *ethnographic educational evaluations* are principally evaluations—not ethnographies—but they use "various ethnographic fieldwork techniques and [present] a cultural interpretation of events" (Fetterman, 1984, p. 13). Ethnography is defined by more than specific techniques: it also fulfills specific values of "phenomenology, holism, nonjudgmental orientation, and contextualization" (Fetterman, 1984, p. 23). These values are essential considerations in ethnography's adoption into one's methodological wheelhouse. Thus, whether in conducting educational research or evaluation, if ethnography's quality and validity are to be preserved, these values must anchor ethnography's conceptualization and use. In crafting my ASER study design, I importantly noted that one can view ethnography as a viable methodology for evaluating programs but not see ethnography as similarly fit for researching M&E. In this chapter, I argue ethnography is well attuned to *studying* monitoring and evaluation, not just *conducting* evaluations.

Apprenticeship: Learning How to Do ASER

My experience of studying ASER was characterized by my striving for an insider perspective or for a "bicultural" understanding of ASER through *apprenticeship* (Tedlock, 2000, pp. 457–458). During my data collection, I endeavored to know how individuals perceived their ASER activities and interpreted the long-term value of what they were doing. The teachers of my apprenticeship operated at different levels of ASER: (a) ASER Research Associates and Central Office Staff who were based in Delhi and were responsible for training, supervising, and supporting ASER state teams to execute it; (b) ASER State Team Members and Managers who were based year-round in the state where they executed ASER, including a few seasonal ASER workers who supported the state team; and (c) ASER Master Trainers and partner organization members, who operated at the district-level in each state.

Beyond wanting to grasp the national culture of India and the numerous subcultures that comprise the tapestry of its states, I wanted to comprehend ASER at its different levels and participate in it according to the culture of M&E that I was being taught *implicitly* via ASER's organization and activities and *explicitly* through its training and protocols. Tedlock (2000) suggests that

> Just as one can become "bilingual," given enough time and effort, so one can learn to behave appropriately within a different cultural setting and even acquire a second worldview. The main way that this is accomplished is through direct participation in the practices of the new culture. (p. 458, partially quoting Tedlock, 1991)

Laboring to become bicultural translated into several instances where my primary role became that of participant (rather than observer) in training for and implementing ASER. I apprenticed under the conscientious and generous guidance of numerous ASER Centre staff members across multiple states and learned via these teachers how to "behave appropriately" within the new setting of ASER organizational activities as well as the cultural specificity of where ASER was being conducted at that moment (e.g., in the various villages of different states). Connecting apprenticeship to not only the ethnographer's capacity to see and act biculturally but also to negotiate issues of power in research, Tedlock (2000) explains

> Undergoing an apprenticeship has long been considered a way to equalize power differentials between ethnographers and their consultants. By dismantling and reorganizing the social interaction from that of an inquiring outsider to a relationship between teacher and student, apprenticeship becomes a negotiated ethnographic endeavor. (p. 458)

In the process of apprenticeship, I gradually understood more about the worldviews of people with whom I interacted. I learned about the philosophy behind ASER, how to prepare for ASER, how to execute ASER, and how to explain ASER's significance and findings to others—one could think of this ecology of ASER philosophy, norms, practices, and meaning-making as substantiating ASER's unique culture that has been cultivated over time to achieve its M&E aims. ASER also required competencies that had somewhat different translations in every context in which I learned about conducting it—I found that the culture of ASER, especially some of its norms and the meaning-making behind it—shifted from the organizational center (in Delhi) as ASER came to be translated to the context of a different state's villages, schools, and

people.[9] Consequently, it was essential to my holistic understanding of ASER that the ethnography was broad in scope—multisited as well as multilevel, including the analysis of structural realities. While I interpret my apprenticeship as reorganizing my interactions with people and fostering collaborative problem-solving with my ASER counterparts during our travel, data collection, and interpretation of various events, it is difficult for me to confidently ascertain whether it profoundly influenced power differentials between us, as Tedlock suggests it can. Such a pronouncement on my part seems self-interested, yet I also understand how changing power dynamics directly relates to the commitments of transformative work. During the bulk of my apprenticeships, what I am more confident in is our authentic camaraderie as fellow education fieldworkers, our genuine mutual interests in ASER's success, and our shared love of cross-cultural, social work.

Fieldwork Dilemmas[10]

Cross-cultural ethnography is fraught with ethical dilemmas, sometimes anticipated at the onset of a research project and other times not. When the ethnographer is a linguistic and cultural outsider, I believe these dilemmas can be somewhat ameliorated by diligent, prolonged preparation that includes substantial research on issues of diversity, inequality, and marginalization in the study's relevant contexts; language training; gaining meaningful in-person experience in the contexts or with the communities related to the ethnography; as well as a plan for practicing reflexivity amid practice. My perception is that such preparation enriches us as beings with greater sensitivity to the scope of human experience and cross-cultural study—the act of "intentionally putting [yourself] in culturally uncomfortable positions" (Hood, n.d., as cited in Frazier et al., 2023, 18:35)—also prepares us as better researchers or evaluators attuned to nuance and diversity in the communities we more readily recognize as our own. Nevertheless,

[9] Two studies that are underway will detail these shifts in culture from Delhi to state environments in which ASER is implemented. One study examines the experience and meaning of ASER in Rajasthan for women who are engaged in it. The other study investigates how recruitment and data collection for ASER are uniquely shaped by the sociopolitical and cultural context of the state of Manipur.
[10] The title of this section draws inspiration from the extraordinary book, *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, edited by Diane Wolf (1996). Though I do not explicitly frame this ethnography as "feminist," my preparation as a researcher and my critical views of inquiry, societies, and education systems have been influenced by feminist and gender scholars like Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Mohanty, and Karen Monkman. As explained by Mertens & Wilson (2019), feminist research and evaluation has contributed substantially to the transformative paradigm.

cross-cultural ethnographers or evaluators (or evaluation researchers) should not dismiss their limitations and the potential harm they can elicit. My experience is that despite significant and sincere preparation, some substantial challenges persist. Reflecting on the central issues of quality and ethics in my study of which I am aware, I want to highlight four areas in which cultural differences and my capacities as a researcher presented challenges over time for my ethnographic study of ASER.

Influencing the ASER Process

The first issue is in how I influenced the ASER process that I was seeking to observe. I undoubtedly created extra work for ASER staff (whom I shadowed) in their own negotiations of access in the villages and in their explanations of their purpose and ASER's data collection process. My fieldwork relied heavily on the gatekeeping, cultural knowledge, and communication instincts and skills of ASER workers at multiple levels in ASER's structure. Many of my field-based activities, including my communicating with people in villages, were facilitated through ASER staff. My study design was based on my embeddedness in ASER state teams, and my observations were tied to their actions and those of people who reported to them like ASER partners and volunteers.

Communicating

A related issue was communication, given the immense linguistic diversity of India and, specifically, across the states and districts where I did my fieldwork. Local languages represented in the study belong to three larger language families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Tibeto-Burman. These communicative realities are one of the primary reasons why ASER relies heavily upon local partner organizations and volunteer fieldworkers. Early on in designing my study, I realized if I was to conduct a multisite ethnography across several Indian states, I was not going to have the linguistic fluency to communicate well without translation in the rural communities in which ASER takes place. My challenges included navigating translation into English and coping with how language limited my observations and influenced my observations' independence. My Hindi and Urdu language skills never became strong enough for me to feel comfortable conducting interviews or fieldwork in those languages. Also, in two of the states (Manipur and Tamil Nadu), Hindi was not a widely spoken language, and English was the

second state language, though not spoken by all people, particularly in rural areas. Finally, in Rajasthan—a Hindi-speaking state—regional variations in how the language was spoken (*Rajasthani*) meant even native Hindi speakers from Delhi, whom I accompanied during fieldwork, sometimes had issues with mutual comprehension.

Interpreting the Perspective of Villagers and Volunteers

Collecting and interpreting data related to villagers' and families' experiences of ASER was an issue. The ideas of people I encountered in villages were hard for me to access independently of ASER staff. Also, because of the nature of how ASER is conducted, I spent only small amounts of time with people in these communities. My time with them was structured around the ASER fieldworkers' data collection and ASER staff's monitoring of data quality. Consequently, early on in my project, I decided that I could not competently or ethically collect and interpret data on villagers' perspectives of ASER. This type of analysis (if attempted) would present major quality and ethical issues given (a) my lack of cultural knowledge across dozens of communities, (b) the short period I typically had for building rapport and understanding with community members, and (c) the subsequent problems I would encounter with the validity of my interpretations. Ultimately, my study was one of the perceptions of different people within the ASER organization (e.g., national and state staff, district partners, and volunteers) and the Indian officials and educational experts with whom I could communicate principally in English. Within the ASER organization, I least understood the perspective of volunteers—one because of their greater number and diversity as compared to ASER national and state staff, and two, because I spent comparatively much less time with any one volunteer than I did with ASER national and state staff members. The people who I had the most time apprenticing under, having conversations with, and traveling with directly influenced whose perspectives I most understood and whose views of ASER were most pronounced in my research.

Accessing Memories

The other issue I want to highlight is that of memory. I have been working with ASER study data for a decade. The interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents that I read from my 2014–2015 fieldwork are accompanied by a fuzziness in accessing the mind space I was in when I asked those questions, wrote those notes, or collected those documents. Independent of my

data, I no longer possess clear memories of many interactions that produced these data, even though I was the sole ethnographer involved in every aspect of data collection. I trade previous access to my full range of embodied memories of collecting the data with my present access to a new depth of sophistication as a researcher (and a broader insight into the effects and significance of ASER) that I did not have before. This tradeoff is uncomfortable, and I have accepted it as part of my work with data over time. The tradeoff spotlights the need to heed advice about converting "headnotes" to fieldnotes and memoing about everything that seems consequential (see Tracy, 2019, p. 130).

Fieldwork Reflections: Stitching Together Then and Now[11]

My dissertation fieldwork was the culmination of four years of traveling to India to do different forms of educational work: school teaching, university and NGO research consulting, and qualitative field research. Camino (1997) explains the "salience of extended fieldwork" in preparation for good ethnography—particularly, how fieldwork brings with it orientation- and skill-building lessons, such as learning patience and a "tolerance for ambiguity," listening, and "seeing patterns" (p. 45). These long visits to India (from my home in California, United States) were principally to help me learn about the country's diverse cultures and education system—the system's history, its variation across contexts, and its contemporary features and issues—in exchange for helping local organizations to complete specific projects or fulfill essential tasks. The work's reciprocity entailed me using my research skills, instructional skills, and labor as repayment for my cultural, linguistic, technical, and logistical apprenticeships. As a white American woman, these apprenticeships were crucial to nurturing my political and interpersonal awareness, sensitivity, and ethics across a plurality of environments that constituted my dissertation research. These environments ranged from a highly respected public university in Rajasthan, to a community-based human rights organization in Tamil Nadu, to an education ministry office in Manipur. My apprenticeships in India coincided with historical, linguistic, and cultural study at home through graduate coursework and independent study. The framing of what I was learning was influenced by the critical and social justice theory frameworks I studied:

[11] The first two paragraphs of this section were previously published (with minor changes) in the introduction of the first volume (Goodnight, 2025).

feminist standpoint theories (e.g., Harding, 1992; Collins, 1986; Narayan & Harding, 2000); postcolonial, subaltern, and dependency theories (e.g., Escobar, 2011; Mohanty, 1984); critical race theories (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006); and neo-Marxist theories and Freirean theory in education (Freire, 1982, 2013; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Torres, 2008). During my doctoral work, I initiated other studies that were complementary to my dissertation work: one on the application of critical race theories to studying educational discrimination in India (Goodnight, 2017) and another on the systematic exclusion of children from historically marginalized and underserved backgrounds in India's large-scale learning and schooling data, which used ASER data and was co-authored with an ASER Centre colleague, Savitri Bobde (Goodnight & Bobde, 2018).

My field data collection for ASER in village homes, rural schools, organizations, and government offices in India concluded in May 2015. On the one hand, the data collection was strategic and planful—the outgrowth of much preparation, individual study, and self-work—but, on the other hand, the fieldwork process was reliant on flexibility, openness, care, and friendship. Fieldwork entailed adjusting to fluid plans and changing circumstances and relying on people's immense generosity—not only generosity in sharing their knowledge and time during stressful periods with intense travel and workloads, but also generosity in sharing their families' homes, their dinners and celebrations, their spiritual practices, their plans and aspirations, and their friendship. Finding shared interests, values, and experiences with people whom I collaborated with during the dissertation made it possible to conduct it and increased its likelihood of being useful beyond its credentialing function for my doctoral degree. I worked to find avenues for being reciprocal and useful amidst this period that was largely dedicated to my own learning and to research that I devised. Forging trusting relationships, having transparent interactions, and reevaluating what is ethical and fair are common aspects of ethnographic work and collaborative work (Buckband, 2025; Bustos & Wright, 2025). Unexpectedly and fortunately, my fieldwork became deeply enmeshed in the friendships that I formed during my trips to India. It was these friendships, alongside the wide-ranging expertise and information provided by so many people who participated in this study, that substantiated the insights in the data. At the same time, I faced many complexities, challenges, and dilemmas during my research related to cultural interpretation, ethics, self-presentation, and communication.

During my ethnographic study, several apprenticeships allowed me to learn about ASER by *doing* (e.g., traveling, training, and surveying) and to learn from many teachers who conducted ASER at different levels and across numerous Indian states. Apprenticeships give researchers the opportunity to understand the steps of a process, its intricacies and contingencies. My apprenticeships across several districts afforded an embodied experience of the work, using my senses to perceive how doing ASER often feels in the body—its physical demands, its tangible skills, and how ASER training, travel, and data collection looks and sounds. Over time, I developed a multi-sensory understanding of the essence of ASER's foundational activities and requisite environmental and social arrangements.

Ethnography's prolonged field-based and relational methods facilitated my observation and interpretation of the social and cultural dynamics on the ground that are embedded in M&E but often underrepresented in reports of M&E data. One example of such dynamics is presented in the opening scenario for this chapter: the (sometimes delicate) negotiation between ASER volunteer and school headmaster to collect government school data. I believe knowledge of cultural and contextual dynamics should guide public considerations of what is being measured and understood via M&E findings. Moreover, the process of M&E—not solely its results—can be its source of transformation for many participants (Goodnight, 2023; Haylock & Miller, 2016), and thus, observing and reporting on how people participate in the M&E process sheds light on not only the data's validity but also the M&E effort's grassroots effects (Goodnight, 2017b, 2022). My study's interviews with educational officials, experts, and activists at the state and national levels (paired with document and policy analysis) gave me insights into ASER's broader meaning and consequences in India.

In closing, I return to the volume's themes—comparative, intersectional, and transformative—to discuss how each showed up in my work. Our inquiry as graduate students is largely impacted by how we are trained and by who we are trained. Over roughly a decade, I was mentored by wonderful comparative educationists, Karen Monkman, Edith Mukudi Omwami, and Kathryn Anderson-Levitt. As a result, I approached my dissertation as a comparative education scholar with a sturdy belief that the quality of my work would be predicated on my deepening cultural knowledge and skill as well as my commitment to prolonged historical, linguistic, and sociological study. I understood I was trying to cultivate two perspectives that I could put in constant conversation with one another: the first perspective was steeped in my

cultural humility and marked by my continuous striving for the strongest emic understanding I could cultivate, and the second perspective was crafted from my own life experience, values, and scholarly study of critical social theories (e.g., feminist, postcolonial, and culturally responsive) and relevant literature. In addition to constructing these perspectives, I understood I needed to do sound methodological work. Vertical case study methodology provides me with a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing how to interpret my fieldwork in villages and ASER offices within the broader sociopolitical dynamics and histories of Indian states and the nation.

The concept of intersectionality ongoingly informs my analysis of myself as a researcher in India. Intersectionality has also shaped how I perceive educational privilege, access, and discrimination in the country, so it is foundational to my etic interpretation of the meaning of ASER in India. Children's region, ruralness, gender, religion, caste, class, skin color, and age are all characteristics that I identify as potentially significant in their continued access to and benefit from education (Goodnight, 2017). Some of these characteristics (e.g., gender, region, age, and class) are captured in ASER data and illuminate the characteristics' intersecting relationship with learning and reveal the educational inequities in India's contemporary rural education system. For example, ASER 2012 data showed "that girls are twice as more likely to be out of school than boys in Rajasthan (10.3% compared to 5%), supporting claims that both children's identity and regional characteristics influence schooling"—the difference between boys and girls in the national figures for India that year is only 0.9% in favor of boys (Goodnight & Bobde, 2018, p. 13). In ASER 2022, the difference between boys and girls being out of school had narrowed to 0.8% for younger children (7-10 years old) and 1.2% for children 11 years and older in Rajasthan. However, among the oldest children (ages 15-16 years) in Rajasthan, there was a 10.6% difference in boys' attendance of private schools compared to girls, demonstrating a substantial gender gap in parents' financial investment in education. My ongoing study of ASER and educational policy in India (e.g., Tiwari & Goodnight, 2024) has sustained my belief in the value of intersectional analyses of education in India.

Regarding the transformative theme, my investment of time, my collaboration with others during fieldwork, and my continuous self-work were all significant aspects of my ethnography. Was my ethnography transformative? If I were being a transformative researcher, wouldn't I have actively reshaped the status quo of cross-cultural inquiry through my project? Wouldn't I have somehow disrupted the ways power operated in the environments I was researching, and

wouldn't I have changed how power was structured between other people and me? I do not think I accomplished these things in my ethnographic work. Instead, I believe I strived to study something that was *itself* transformative to better understand it. Particularly, I wanted to understand how ASER worked, why people did it, and what meaning people derived from it. Thus, my role was highly interpretivist and maybe too conventional; I was not a changemaker. The people whose work I studied—the ASER architects, staff, partners, and volunteers—many of them were (and are) changemakers. To study ASER well, I learned quickly that it was crucial for me to set aside my own assumptions about what social change, justice, and ethics should look like in favor of trying to learn about, as precisely as I could, how the people doing ASER saw these issues and the values they brought to this M&E effort. This emic understanding has been the primary focus of my ASER published studies (e.g., Goodnight & Bobde, 2018; Goodnight, 2022). More recently, I have started to consider how theories from evaluation (Goodnight, 2023) and comparative education can enhance investigations of ASER's influence and meaning. A critical study on ASER and gender—particularly the experiences of female data collectors in Rajasthan for ASER 2014—is underway.

My experience of conducting the ethnography of ASER clarified how the trustworthiness of my research was (and is) rooted in my ability to see biculturally, strengthened by my commitment of time for apprenticeship in the M&E context. Completing the study's fieldwork reinforced my ongoing commitment to careful inquiry through use of ethnographic methods and continuous self-work, which bolsters my relational and interpretive skills. I came to appreciate how cultural preparation must also be supplemented by consistent reflection on the theories, values, and ethics that guide one's inquiry. Writing about this ethnography over the last decade has deepened my appreciation for the intricacies and difficulties of cross-cultural fieldwork and for its contributions to my growth, humility, and creativity as a researcher.

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