

Digantar Site Visit: Dec 2016 by Prashant

Context:

I first heard about Digantar back in 2006 when they were being forced to shutdown because of Jaipur Development Authority's decision to use the school land for private university. But in December 2016, I visited Digantar for the 1st time and got to know how it worked, i.e. *teachers had the freedom to do choose what they wanted to teach and how provided they can justify their choice* or in other words *they had the clarity of thought behind their choice and could convince others*. But more than that I was also able to see the terrain it operated in and what education meant for the community Digantar continues to shape. Most of the below is borrowed heavily from Swati's trip. Some of which I was able to verify myself.

School and Premises now:

There are 2 schools – a small one with 2 teachers and 64 students and the bigger one that I have visited so far with 7 teachers (for primary) and approximately 210 children (roughly 30 children per teacher). Age group of children 5-11yrs. The other school for upper primary and high school is currently not operating.

There are 2 main parts – (i) the primary section with

- 12 class rooms around a rectangular courtyard with moon phases painted on one end and the solar system on the other
 - 2 of these were used by the Class 10 and 12 girls
 - one is used as teachers' room
 - one is empty
- 4 corner rooms – office, meeting room, visitors' room, carpentry room,
- a small former office and a storage (I guess)
- there are toilets and drinking water, a clay area, playground and area for gardening

And (ii) space for middle school, library and many other things – this part got built later and is current not used (except for the library). There are classrooms, labs (science and computer), medical room – where doctor and nurse comes once a week and children and villagers can utilize them, and provision for vocational education. It also has an amphitheater.

Since this is far from the villages/children's homes, two buses pick them up and drop them back. In the primary section, each teacher has around 30 children of mixed age group. This teachers takes complete responsibility for these children – teaching them Hindi, English, Math, EVE and art. Regrouping of children happens every year based on how much they have learnt. They may or may not continue with the same teacher – depends on their need and the teacher's comfort level.

All photos for this visit are here: <https://goo.gl/photos/Sm7PWAWpDjGAbQpm8>

Day 1: 21 Dec –

Since our flight landed the same morning we arrived in the school after most of the morning activities were done(10 AM). Spent most of the time socializing with teachers and children. Toured classes, workshops, library, computer centers and science labs. The teachers here are very dedicated and have stuck with school even during the financial crunch. They are very passionate about their mission and are very clear on why they are here. Every teacher talked

about the rigorous training they had to go thru before starting the school and how it tested their commitment. Some teachers do not make it thru the course because the training questions a lot of closely held beliefs (caste, way of teaching, knowledge etc). There was another person from Holland who was also touring the school (they wanted to see if there was any scope of setting up field hockey training in school). The children are used to people observing them while they study and are completely natural. They take charge in the class when needed and drive most of the discussion. I attended one of the class where the teacher was going around explaining do's and dont's during winter season. One girl in particular (Palak) was being the leader of her class and was brimming with confidence.

We also toured the carpentry and pottery shops where two girls were doing really daring wood cutting work. I asked them if they were not afraid of getting hurt, to which they said "It happens".

The labs, library and computer centers were very well equipped. The school doesn't believe in cutting corners. But the most interesting aspect was the very lively notice board. You have to be there to feel how clearly it documents and instructs everyone involved. It makes sense only when you realize what it means when all children are involved in running the school and how they deal with issues affecting all schools.

Later in the day I was lucky to catch up with Swati who was also in town.

Day 2: 22 Dec -

We were able to be at the school from morning. Like Swati mentioned earlier this is how the day generally proceeds.

9:00 – 9:15 → cleaning the premises – children and teachers alike

9:15 – 9:30 → assembly in each class

9:30 – 10:00 → games + a 10min break

10:00 – 12:00 → 3 classes of 40min each

12:00 – 12:50 → lunch

12:50 – 2:50 → one 40 min class and one 80 min art class

3:00 → children leave

3:00 – 5:00 → teachers jot down their observations on each child and plan for the next day

Since Swati had already given me good pointers about the "teaching" aspects of the school, I decided to spend a bigger part of the second day with the community. I met the original community leaders who were crucial to the creation and recreation of the school. Heard the story of how the community fought back and eventually rebuilt the school. I also met a few alumnis of the school. Strong, confident women running household now as many of them couldn't go to college after the school due to community priorities and financial pressure. One of them actually helped me overcome my own blindness about "purpose of education". Over all it was a very fulfilling experience to see the school making progress in this community where

once education was taboo for women. Also heartwarming was to see the relationship between the teachers (Hemant and Navrat) and the community members and ex-students.

How the school functions:

At the beginning of the year there is annual planning and then it is broken down into monthly targets. These targets get refined every month (a similar exercise was happening on Sat). Then it gets further broken down into daily plan and daily observations. The observations includes behavior also. Since all of them are working in the system for a long time, the road map for each child is quite clear to them. A child might achieve the set target earlier or might need more time. The planning/target setting is adjusted accordingly. Also children are often clubbed together according to their learning levels and their target for the month is set as a group. This meticulous planning and record of observation is what CCE should be. It reminded me of how teachers do it in Montessori.

Each child gets 4 copies – Hindi, English, math and EVS and they continue till all pages are used. Then they get new copy. There are individual folders to keep the art works of each child. In most of the classes that I observed, there were two groups of children with similar tasks. Teacher might assign tasks to one group and those children would work independently. Meanwhile the teacher might assign a different task to the other group or would teach them something and then assign independent work. Often the discussion initiated might continue the following day. Since it is the same teacher, one class can get extended by 5-10 or 20 minutes as needed.

The art class include library, performing art – e.g. rhymes, story-telling, theater and also art-craft of various kinds including carpentry, clay (potter's wheel also!) and paper crafts and many more. Often children may be working one project together. Digantar considers art as an intrinsic aspect of language development. There is a natural flow between other classes and the art classes.

Digantar is attempting to **crowd source funding** for the schools. They have now packaged it as per child cost. But they are thinking of packaging it as **per group** (i.e. ~30 children under one teacher). They are using Facebook to reach out and that's how they managed to raise the funds for Classes 9-12. This will be like SAC i.e. Support A Group (30 children under one teacher).

Digantar has now started charging a nominal fees from students. It is about Rs 1000 a year per student. There is a sliding scale to this and if the family cannot afford the fees the students are not denied entry.

In addition, they have redesigned their **charges for visitors**. E.g. every year students of the 4yr B.El.Ed courses from Delhi colleges visit. From now on Digantar will be charging them Rs.1000 per student per day (Rs.600 for stay and food + Rs.400 for the academic part). There is a fear that charging might reduce the number of visitors/students. But Digantar really needs to shake that off and be more confident in charging money for the good exposure they provide.

They are also looking at how they can package their existing publications and sell them as **sets** of books and not as single books.

How Asha can help:

1. Support Digantar – elementary school – for 5 years

- a. The starting amount can be Rs.44 lakhs for 2016-17 and can be adjusted each year depending on how much they raise otherwise
- b. Have the support as a rolling fund, i.e. if they manage to raise (say) Rs.15 lakh during 2016-17, Asha can give Rs.30 for 2017-18
- c. If the chapter cannot support all Rs.44 lakhs, support as much as possible

