

DIGANTAR SITE VISIT (VIRTUAL)

| APRIL 7, 2021 |

We had a virtual site visit (via Zoom, linked [here](#)) with Riti Das Dhankar, director of the school. This was my first time seeing the school and I wasn't able to fulfill all of the items on the site visit checklist (due to the virtual site visit). At the end of this report, I've linked Swati Sircar's site visit report from October 2019 for her in-person observations.

- Katie Harrison

Riti gave us a tour of the campus:

COVID Protocols:

Students have their temperatures taken before they enter the school grounds, they immediately wash their hands at a very large washing station (which Digantar expanded to accommodate the students during this time), they have access to hand sanitizer throughout the school, and all teachers, students, and staff are masked while on school grounds.

At the entrance to the school there are several areas which give a clue about Digantar's philosophy:

- 1) A cleaning chart -- In normal times, teachers' and students' duties are listed there and together everyone works to keep the school clean. During COVID they have stopped sharing the duties of cleaning because it is difficult to maintain social distancing
- 2) A news bulletin board which is updated each day by the students
- 3) The Constitution of the Bal Panchayat -- The Bal Panchayat is a small electoral body of five children & one teacher. Students are elected to this council via a proper election. Students as young as four years old can run for election. Students cast their votes into secure ballot boxes, have vote counting and interviews with student media, and finally there is an assembly where there is a transfer of responsibility to the new council members. This student council helps students to understand the idea of democracy, and the responsibility to uphold promises made.

The school grounds:

All around the school there are beautiful paintings which were done by the people of Digantar and were funded by a grant. Outside each classroom, teachers place copies of their daily plans which give a summary of what they will do in each subject throughout the day. Riti said that this helps to keep them organized so that everybody knows what will be happening each day with each group. The classroom walls are covered in teaching materials (charts, interactive displays, etc.), made by the teachers themselves. There are two workshops a year in which teachers generate their new classroom materials.

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Locations within the school:

Digantar has a beautiful campus and many resources for teachers and students:

- 1) The Materials Library – This is a resource for teachers. It has many kinds of learning materials and posters, etc. for teachers’ use. These materials have largely been made by the teachers themselves and are shared into the library when finished. They can be checked out by other teachers and returned later. The room is organized by types of materials: with a maths corner, a puzzles corner, and language corner, etc.
- 2) The Carpentry Room – This is “the heart and soul of the school.” At Digantar, children start learning carpentry at age seven. At first, they develop dexterity by drawing shapes on paper and cutting them out. Later, they graduate to using wood and creating things. Some of the students’ objects I saw were houses, toys, flying birds, carved faces, windmills, and many others. Riti said that the children really enjoy it.
- 3) The Computer Lab – In non-COVID times, all the kids have computer periods, even the smaller ones.
- 4) Science Lab -- a proper lab set-up
- 5) An outdoor amphitheater/stage for presentations
- 6) Two libraries – Digantar has more than 20,000 books for the students, mostly in Hindi. It also has many books for educators (Digantar’s teachers and the teachers in training who come to study at Digantar) including books on philosophy, psychology, the theory of education, and all kinds of classroom resource materials. In the larger library we also saw the bi-monthly magazine that students create, filled with their drawings and writings.
- 7) Lots of outdoor play space – There are many places for children to play and there is a field hockey ground as well. Before COVID, Digantar had a coach to teach the girls field hockey; they really enjoyed it.
- 8) School Buses – Digantar has two school buses which usually run to pick up/drop off students. They aren’t being used during COVID because it’s not financially sustainable.

Some details about Digantar:

The students:

Digantar serves 215 students, grades pre-primary (4 years old) to 10th standard. Even during this time of COVID they are reaching every student, by phone or in-person.

Students pay Rs. 1000 per year if they can. Some families with more than one student attending may pay Rs. 500 a year, and some families do not pay at all. Riti said that the tuition is more of a token amount and the school uses the tuition money to buy stationary, etc.

All students are welcome to attend. There is a waiting list for admission and it is first come first served. Digantar has a 60:40 policy, so 60% of its classroom will be girls and 40% will be boys. Digantar also welcomes students of all castes and religions and has a good number of Dalit and minority children attending.

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Digantar encourages students to continue their education after leaving school. They meet with parents and encourage further education. Many of Digantar's graduates have pursued their graduation.

Students are not provided a midday meal; they bring this from home. The government provides midday meals to government schools but Digantar is private, so it does not have this option.

The staff:

There are 11 teachers at Digantar, 3 coordinators, and several support staff.

We observed two types of teaching happening at Digantar:

In-person classes for 10th standard students:

10th standard students were allowed to attend in-person classes at that time in order to prepare for their board exams. Shortly after our site visit the 2nd wave of COVID hit India and the government mandated that even 10th standard students had to study from home.

We observed that students were sitting at desks, were spaced well enough apart from each other, and were comprised mostly of girls. We observed two maths classes. Riti told us that generally students would have been sitting together on a large floor rug but that, because there were so few of them there due to COVID, they had enough desks and enough space so students were set-up that way.

Classes via phone for 1st – 9th standard students:

All the classrooms were empty but the teachers were still there, conducting lessons over their phones. The students do not have computers at home so, if they had access to a smart phone, teachers conducted lessons with them by video call. Many parents take their mobile phones with them when they go to work so teachers have to expand their hours of availability to help those students. Some students do not have access to smart phones and teachers conduct their lessons over regular voice call. In cases where no phone is available at all, teachers visit the students' homes once a week to deliver lessons and help with homework.

Teachers generally conduct lessons one-on-one. All the lessons we saw were conducted in this way. Riti said that it is difficult to conduct group lessons because younger students do not know how to manage that kind of technology. We observed teachers using the blackboard, their classroom posters, and books to give visual lessons to their students. In general, teachers work with students on a very individual basis at Digantar, developing detailed lessons geared toward their students' individual needs. Now that lessons are being delivered by phone, teachers are calling their students nearly every day to teach them their particular lesson and assign homework.

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They follow-up the next day with feedback and then continue with the next lessons. They work with students in 20-minute increments and then move on to the next student. This requires a great deal of effort on the teacher's part. In addition, the teachers have made themselves available to their students at any time and Riti said that the students do call them at any time :).

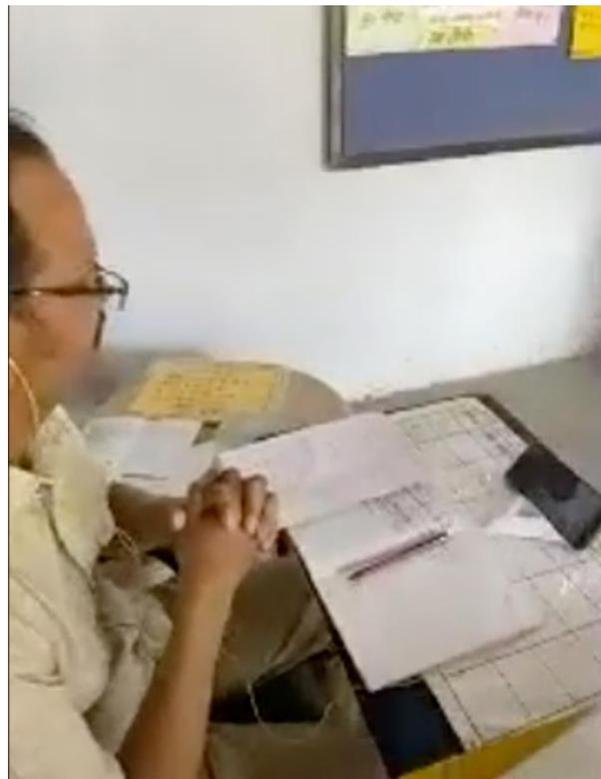
Direct conversations with teachers, students, parents, or neighbors:

Unfortunately, due to the virtual site visit, I wasn't able to have direct conversations with any of these groups.

A few screenshots from our virtual site visit:



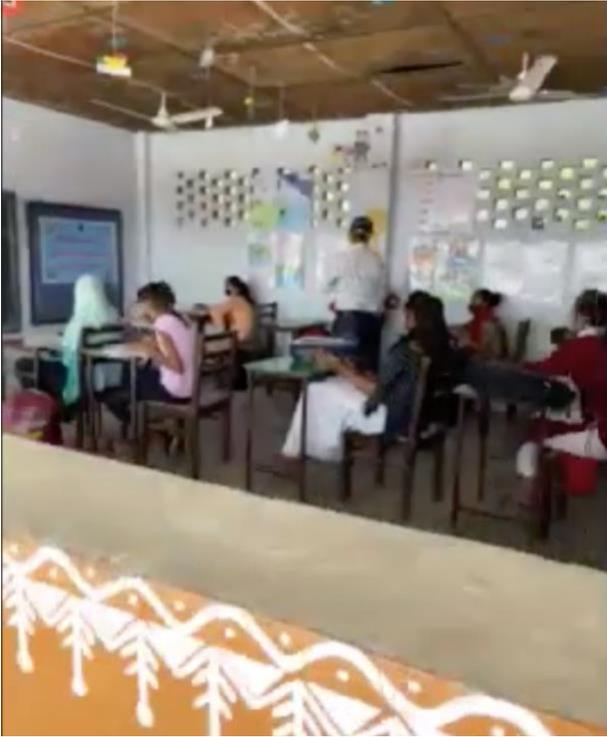
Beautiful classroom materials made by teachers



A teacher conducting lessons via smartphone

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10th standard students in a Maths class



A teacher conducting lessons via video call

FOR REFERENCE

[Site Visit Report from last in-person site visit](#)

By Swati Sircar

21 Oct 2019