

On Future Plans for Bandhyali School

The Bandhyali School, it seems, will survive; though at a different location and the primary section situated at more than one place. The court had directed the JDA, under a negotiated agreement, that the school “shall not be dispossessed from the property in dispute till the allotment order is issued by JDA in its favour and six weeks thereafter, when the petitioner society shall handover the vacant possession of the disputed land”. The court also directed the JDA to consider allotment of land at a concessional rate for schools and charitable purposes (that’s how the system sees work in education for deprived sections!), but does not make it binding.

Obviously the outcome is not totally satisfactory. Acceptance of relocation of the school is acceptance of the argument that the government can overrule the community purposes and community’s will. That the government can dispossess a school for the poor in favour of a private university. It also demonstrates the power of the market and political clout. But, the court order to dispossess the school only after allotting alternative land also recognises the worth of the effort being made, need of the school for the community and the injustice inherent in JDA’s ignoring the applications of Digantar for so many years. That is why the court has directed JDA to first allot the land at identified, mutually agreed location, before dispossessing the school.

At a more involved level the idea of dismantling the school building is painful. There are so many memories of so many people of events, struggles, people who contributed, and small successes that the sense of loss of something ir retrievable is very tangible. It is a mixed bag.

The relocation and allotment of land will solve the problem of constant hesitation in developing infrastructure at the school and expanding it to take in more students. It will also be located in the centre of three villages of Kho Nagorian, Bhavgarh Bandhya, and Khatipura, which is more suitable for a secondary school.

It has become necessary now that we construct the new school building, and organise space to run primary section in one or two hamlets.

This episode has also forced us to pay more attention to the changing world around us and re-assess the need and mandate for our Alternative Elementary Education Programme in general and Bandhyali School in particular. The situation in the last fifteen years or so has substantially changed in terms of availability of school, parents’ interest in education of their children, and economic capability of many people. What remains stubbornly unchanged is the quality of education available in those schools, second priority to girl child’s education, and numerous restrictions on the girls. A rough assessment of the situation on the basis of day-to-day experiences of running four schools for 650 children in the area indicates:

1. Need for education is appreciated much better compared to 15 years back and there is an effort to send children to schools.
2. The girl child’s education still is very low on the priority and needs both making facilities available as well as a lot of persuasion for it.
3. Though the boys are sent to schools, even to private schools, but their progress after primary is very unsatisfactory.

4. The girls who can continue till 8th seems to gain substantially in negotiating power to wrest space to continue education at the least till 10th if opportunities are available.

The community itself has been raising demand for a school closeby, where the girls can study till the secondary level.

Since it's inception Digantar's agenda has been focused on how to run good schools, and what education should strive for. The pedagogical and philosophical issues have been as important as the issues of access; in the eyes of some perhaps more important. Considering all the above perhaps it is a good time to redefine the future course of development of the Bandhyali School and deliberate upon the issues connected with this.

- It seems to us that the Bandhyali School now should be planned as a good Senior Higher Secondary School, particularly for girls. Should it also cater for boys? Should it be free school for boys too?
- This school should consciously strive to workout tenable solutions to various issues in elementary and secondary education: The issues of relationship between education, knowledge and work—what is work based pedagogy? What aspects of the curriculum it can effectively deal with? How a school could be organised on this idea?
- The issues related to competition, exams, stress—is it necessary that the children have to mug up to succeed in the present-day education? Is it possible to work out a pedagogy and curriculum that allows children to learn with understanding, with work and still do well in the mind-less competitive exams?
- Should we think of this school as an autonomous school (or a CBSE Resource School) that has its own curriculum and addresses important curricular and pedagogical issues?
- What are the ways of involving the community in all decision-making regarding the school? How can we make and sustain it as a community based school? What exactly does it mean to be a community-based school?
- How can we ensure the sustained academic support of the educationist community to manage the school, to advise, to give support for development of curriculum and pedagogy?
- How can we make such a school sustainable and growing as per the needs and challenges?

In short, we need to deliberate on the character of future school, and equal stakes of larger educational community, local community and Digantar. We propose a two-day meeting/workshop on these issues in July or August; when the school is reopened at it's new location, fixing dates more precisely has to wait till the allotment happens and construction process starts. What are your views on: (1) holding such a workshop? (2) What should we deliberate upon in that workshop?
