

Shaheed School – Sangharsh Aur Nirmaan Ka Ek Kadam

A step towards the struggle for and the construction of a new future



About the School

Nestled in the little neighbourhood of Shaheed Nagar in the industrial area of Birgaon, Raipur, lies Shaheed school. Begun by workers in 1996, the school carries a sense of historic importance. It was born out of the vibrant working class movement led by Comrade Shankar Guha Niyogi. The active participation and involvement of women in unions and the larger struggle, enabled the movement to grow from the work-site in to the homes and houses of workers. It extended beyond trade union activities into all other areas of life. In order to achieve genuine social transformation, engaging with issues of health and education seemed most necessary.

The failure of government schools and the exorbitant fees charged by private schools in the area, compelled us to seek out alternatives, making the responsibility of educating our children, our own. With the belief that education has the power to transform, the workers of the movement took on the responsibility of teaching and learning by deciding to build a school. A school where our children could learn freely and fearlessly of a new and better world. One that would provide an education enabling them to struggle for and build a world free of exploitation, oppression and corruption.

Despite severe financial constraints, workers of the community pooled in their resources and made contributions in the form of bricks, stone, cement, sand, money and labour to help lay the foundational stone of Shaheed School on the 1st of August, 1996. After a fortnight of working day and night, our two-room school was ready by the 15th of August, 1996. On the 18th of the same month, children flocked to the new school, and learning had begun.

In the early stages, we took on children whose schools had failed them, and helped them get through their fifth grade examinations. With both parents at work, there also seemed to be a strong need for a *balvaadi*, or creche – a place where the youngest ones could come to learn and be cared for. Beginning with the balvaadi and class 1, and adding a new grade each year, we had a running primary school by the year 2000.

Today, we are a registered school, and like all other primary schools in the State of Chhattisgarh, we teach Hindi, Mathematics and Environmental Science. Over the years, friends and comrades working in the field of education have come and gone – sending books, materials and visiting the teachers and children on occasion.

We are a team of around 6 to 7 young teachers from the working class neighbourhood of Birgaon, who, despite extremely low salaries and strenuous domestic lives, work dedicatedly with children, attempting to make the school a happy and meaningful place for them to be in. Over the last year and a half, we have attempted to make a more sustained effort at transforming classroom practice. Working upto Class 2, we have been trying to make learning a meaningful, collective and collaborative activity. School often becomes a place where learning tends to take place in an isolated manner, divorced from the experiences of learners. We hope



to create an environment in which the lived experiences of children serve not only as the end to which learning can be applied, but also as the source from which learning begins. We try and look for rich contexts that can serve as starting points for the making of, and engagement with, knowledge. We believe that learning needs to be viewed as a whole and cannot be split into distinctive, fractured strands – mathematics cannot be separated from language or environmental science. While talking about water, for instance, we walk around the basti identifying sources of water, we make estimations and calculations regarding the amount of water we consume or the distance of the water source from school, we experiment with different kinds of water – tasting the saltiness of the sea, or testing the difference between water that is suitable to drink and not, we talk and write about our experiences and activities – who fills water for the home, what did we see on our walk around the basti and why is it that water from



the tap doesn't come from the sea and so on. While we believe strongly in the need for developing trajectories for learning strands – such as developing language and number sense or counting and measurement, these strands cannot be separated from one another, and are in fact, deeply intertwined – making learning a process of critically engaging with and reflecting upon the world around us. Several groups of people have made efforts in this direction before, and some of their work has inspired us – particularly that of Jodogyan, Muskaan and Eklavya, who have willingly shared their materials and support.

The school of course doesn't exist in a vacuum, and our engagement with children cannot be restricted to the classroom alone. It is grounded in the life of the community, and we make an effort to build strong relationships with children's parents – sharing with them our work and engaging with the reality of their homes. All of us – teachers, students, sangathan workers and parents – share the experience of the everyday, living and working in the industrial heartland of the city.

Rooted in this reality, we feel the need to reflect upon and discuss fundamental questions of what kind of education we wish to provide for our children. Often seen as a stepping stone to social mobility, the current system of education tends to act as a filter, serving to exclude, rather than include. This filtration is built around a notion of merit that represents and reinforces existing social hierarchies. It serves to marginalize those already at the fringes of society. How then, do we provide an education that does not simply broaden the scope of individual opportunity, but one that builds dignity and respect, allowing us to engage with the world we live in, in informed and critical ways? It is the navigation of an answer to this question that drives our work at the school.

A Call for Support

Children whose parents are able, pay a fee of Rs. 700 a year. Almost all of this money goes into paying the teachers a salary of Rs 1000 a month, but the required amount is often not met. Needless to say, the money raised by fees and collections doesn't allow us to buy materials for the school. We do *not* take institutional funding of any kind. Over the last year or so, some friends have been contributing a few thousand each month, allowing us to buy books and materials. The school building, which is now nearly two decades old, needs some major repairs. Each year, during the monsoon, water from the tiled roof and walls enters the school rooms. This year, we hope to undertake some repair work by building a new roof and also constructing a toilet. We are hoping to raise about Rs. 4 lakhs. To meet the required amount, funds raised from within the community will not nearly suffice. We are thus turning to friends and well-wishers, with the hope that some of you would be willing to contribute to the school construction fund. For those of you who are willing and able, we would also gratefully welcome a more sustained support to keep up our efforts. Some of you have also been working in the field of education, working to change practices and curricula, raise important questions and find workable solutions. We would be most grateful if you would be interested in visiting and contributing to the school in non-monetary ways as well. We look forward to building a community of support and solidarity with those who share similar dreams and are working towards similar ends.

