

Imlee Mahuaa

Learning in Freedom the Democratic Way

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Imlee Mahuaa School is a school for the children of adivasi communities in and around Balenga Para, a little hamlet in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. In many ways it is a rather novel endeavour especially in present day India which, riding high on modernity is in a hurry to homogenise its diverse traditions of living and learning.

The tribal communities of this large subcontinent have for the past several centuries been at the receiving end of a dominant worldview. The remnants of their way of life, linked closely to nature and forests, are in danger of being abandoned or smothered by the influences of the current development paradigm, technology, and the ill designs of power structures.

This small educational endeavour is a strong bleep on the radar of reason showing that things can be different for adivasi communities and their children.

Background

In India the portfolio of education is held by respective State Governments where as the major policy directives and guidelines for implementation are crafted by the Union Government. While the thrust and focus, since independence, has been on higher education, the foundation on which it is to be based – school education – has been weak and continues to be so. This is despite there being a primary school in almost every village in the country today. For Chhattisgarh, a young state with a large adivasi population, the challenges in multiple areas of civic concern are daunting.

For adivasi children their integration into the education system has largely been a traumatic experience. This is so because we adopted the ‘One Shoe Fits All’ model of education which in any case is ill suited to meet the educational needs of children of a large nation such as ours with its geo-physical, ecological, socio-cultural diversity. The inconsistency is more so when thrust upon a people whose worldview and civilisational moorings go back to a time before settled agriculture became the bedrock of human *progress*.

Our contemporary mainstream lenses are ill suited for understanding how adivasis perceive life, how rich their traditional wisdom is, and what their worldviews are. It is this misconception and the domination by powerful forces like the State and large corporations that have largely lead to their alienation and humiliation. In recent years even physical and psychological torture has been inflicted on them with sanction of the State through the operations of the Salwa Judum. What has compounded the situation is the fact that there has been a steady erosion of overall community control on their environs and natural resources. This has been brought about by the State’s short term developmental goals, its pandering to corporate interests and inability to address the angst of the adivasi people through peaceful dialogue.



The state of adivasi school education has also been besotted with complex issues. There has been no serious attempt by the Education Departments to understand the adivasi worldview, delve into how education for adivasi children should be designed such that they retain their unique culture while helping them acquire the skills needed to deal with changing realities. Issues of the language of instruction, of textbooks that portray little of adivasi life, of inadequate physical infrastructure and teaching materials have been reported (Veerbhadranaika et al, 2012).



If education for adivasi children is to be placed on par with the rest as is their right by virtue of being citizens of a democratic country, it becomes necessary that their integration into the *mainstream*, as different but no less equal, be directed by them *only* if they wish it. They will need to be equipped and supported to direct the change that they desire on their terms.

Then there is the matter of education itself. A vexed issue which in India was steadily usurped and supplanted by the British from the mid 19th century onwards with a system of schooling designed to equip their subjects with skills to help the colonizers administer the Indian subcontinent. A diverse land with its numerous ways of living, parenting, learning, teaching and training their young was destined to be homogenised. Thankfully it met with only limited success and even less acceptance.

Very early in the day, beginning with Tagore and Gandhi, serious attempts were made to realign education to suit the needs of the people of this land. Bold and radical alternative initiatives were proposed and experimented with. An essence of this understanding sees reflection in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 of the Government. The reality on ground continues to tell an entirely different story.

There are independent attempts by individuals and institutions in the adivasi belts of this country who are trying to engage children in an educational experience suited to their needs. Imlee Mahuaa School for adivasi children in the Bastar region is one such that this study attempts to understand.

A fairly close engagement with the school was undertaken in October 2015 with this purpose. This document is based on interviews with the adults and children in Imlee Mahuaa School, parents, a local NGO and observations in the school over a week.

It is hoped that this document would be useful to anyone interested in children, education, adivasi communities and those who wish to engage with children of adivasi communities in particular. We also hope there are useful pointers in this document for those who engage with or wish to start a school and especially to the members of the community where the school itself is located.





The setting in brief

Imlee Mahuaa School (Imlee Mahuaa for short) is a *school* in the midst of an adivasi hamlet – Balenga Para in Kondagaon district in the Bastar area of Chattisgarh. 60 children aged three to fifteen commune here for the day to participate in various activities of which academics is one. Balenga Para is a small, single tribe Muriya Gond adivasi village with 55 households and a population of about 350. 12 children from here study at Imlee Mahuaa. The rest of its students come from three villages in the neighbourhood – Kokodi (27), Kodagoan (8) and Jagadhin Para (13), which are at a distance of three to four kilometres from the school.

About three fourths of the children belong to the Muriya Gond tribe. The rest belong to Schedule Castes or Other Backward Castes (Kalaars, Gaandaas and Pankaas). Ninety percent of the students of Imlee Mahuaa are first generation school goers. All except for two children belong to families in the BPL (Below Poverty Line) economic strata, four families are landless and in a few families one of the parents have salaried employment.

Imlee Mahuaa, started in August 2007, is run by Akanksha Public Charitable Trust, Chennai. It is a registered centre of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) as well as a registered unaided school under the Department of Education of the state of Chhattisgarh.

The very beginnings

After Akanksha Public Charitable Trust (APCT) decided to start a school in a rural area, its search led to explorations in Gadchiroli District in Maharashtra and the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh. Through friends at Paramdham Mudranalay Ashram in Paunar in Wardha District, the trustees met members of an organisation SAATHI (Saathi Samaj Sevi Sanstha) in Kumar Para near Kondagoan. SAATHI had been working in the Bastar region for many years in the area of livelihoods through support to local crafts, health, education and forest rights.

The founders of SAATHI, Bhupesh Tiwari and Hari Bharadwaj, helped APCT in identifying a location and also to liaison with the local community. They went out of their way to support in every possible way.

The identification of a village to locate the school was based on certain criteria that APCT suggested. These were: a rural place where government infrastructure and amenities such as roads, healthcare, electricity and bus service were not in place. Bhupesh and Hari added two more criteria to the list. They suggested choosing a village with a single tribe (essentially for cultural and language uniformity). They also proposed that the village be within a distance of 10-15 kms of the SAATHI office, so that they could be of assistance whenever needed. Of the 100 villages in which SAATHI worked, 10 that met the criteria were visited. Of them, Balenga Para, the very first village that APCT visited, came to be the 'chosen one'.



At the very first meeting (summoned by the beating of drums) Prayaag Joshi, one of the trustees of APCT presented a brief idea of the school. All the residents of Balenga Para unanimously decided to permit APCT to set up a school in their village. The use of the ghotul¹ building was suggested as a make shift arrangement until the school classrooms were built. The only question Prayaag was asked by the villagers: would the children be taught English? To which his measured response was, 'Yes, as one of the subjects'.

1. Ghotul is a traditional institution of learning for adivasi youth. For more information see page 8.

The early days

The school began in 2007 with two students – a local school dropout boy, Heeralal, and the postman’s niece, Anamika from the neighbouring village of Kokodi – and three teachers.

Over the years the number of children who joined the school increased. Admissions were from Balenga Para as well as from the three neighbouring villages of Kokodi, Kodagaon, Jagdhing Para. A maximum intake limit of 60 children was set as the Trust believed that quality could be compromised with a big number. This also happened to comply with the requisite teacher qualification as laid down by the National Council for Teacher Education in 2010 after The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 was passed, wherein a school of up to 60 children has to have two teachers with a BEd. Admission of children to the school now takes place only to fill an occasional vacancy.

Freedom from any one particular ideology or pedagogy

Prayaag admits that initially the school was definitely influenced by Gandhiji’s Nae Taaleem agenda for education, Maria Montessori learning methods and J Krishnamurti’s educational philosophy.

The school began as *Imlee Mahuaa Nae Taaleem Centre for Learning*². Every attempt was made to work with the underlying pedagogy such a name indicated. Children were engaged in ‘productive’ hand work which is the hallmark of Nae Taaleem. Then children engaged in trying to understand curricular linkages to science and social science issues. Soon it was clear that this approach was lacking on two fronts: the adults did not have enough insights into the linkages; the children got bored learning about these linkages, though they enjoyed working with their hands immensely.

Soon the children appeared unhappy, but were hesitant to express their displeasure (as is the practice in adivasi communities). The adults in Imlee Mahuaa then thought about what changes needed to be made to make children truly happy. They realised that “happiness” of the children was of utmost importance. They observed that the children were the happiest when unsupervised. Adivasi children have a lot of freedom at home, so would freedom in school be the right way? The school moved from an adult directed school to one led by the children.

The school has undergone a journey where at every step changes have been made in every aspect of its functioning to ensure that children’s happiness is central. The school operates largely by taking cues from its current situation and from what provides children an enjoyable childhood. Today, Imlee Mahuaa is a bubbling, joyous place teeming with life and energy.

The school today

The school community today has 63 members, of which 60 are children and three adults³ including Prayaag. Milan Baghel, a trained potter, joined the school in 2009. Gautam Sethiya, a post graduate in Economics and currently pursuing a B. Ed has taught at the school for seven years.

2. No child was able to say this name correctly as it was too long for them to remember. The name of the school was changed to *Imlee Mahuaa Vidyalaya* (in Hindi) and *Imlee Mahuaa School* (in English). The children were involved in changing the name.

3. The words *teacher* and *principal* are used only when a recognised designation is needed (like when signing a form) for the outside world; within the school it is a community of children and adults.

The school has students ranging in age from three to fifteen years. It has adopted a vertical grouping structure. The groups are named Sapri, Semar, Seethaphal and Soorajmukhi.

A few students from Soorajmukhi have opted for vocational cum entrepreneurial projects as part of their school work. The vocations opted for are: Pottery and Ceramics; Library and Book Shop; and School Teaching and Entrepreneurship.

Numbers and age ranges of children currently in Imlee Mahuaa		
Name of the Group	Number of Children	Age Range
Sapri	14 (6 girls, 8 boys)	3 to 5 years
Semar	13 (8 girls, 5 boys)	7 to 12 years
Seethaphal	15 (8 girls, 7 boys)	8 to 10 years
Soorajmukhi	18 (13 girls, 5 boys)	11 to 15 years

The weekly routine

The school works Monday through Saturday from 7-30 am to 4-30 pm for all the 12 months of the year⁴. Each day of the week unfolds differently on the basis of a rota of duties and a loosely held timetable while accommodating with ease the necessary departure when the situation demands. Certain daily activities like attendance, cleaning, fetching water, gardening and shared mealtimes are fixed.

Academic and skill based learning include English, Hindi, Mathematics, Science, Environmental Studies cum Social Science, Yoga, Music, Singing, Storytelling, Reading, *Charcha*, Pottery, Drawing and Colouring, Playing indoor and outdoor games, Embroidery and Spinning. The highpoint is the common hour-long library class that takes place three times a week, which is also open to the children of the nearby government school.



Clockwise from top: Yoga; Storytelling; Art

⁴ The entire school took this decision in early 2016. Till 2015, the school worked for 11 months with one month vacation. A small group of children who decided to try the National Open School Secondary Level examinations come to school at 7.30 am.

Charcha sessions (periodic open discussions where children ask any questions) are a reflection of the thinking that goes on in their young curious minds. A sample: Why do we dream? Why does it rain only when the clouds are black? In a corn plant, why are the flowers above but the corn below? How long does it take for rain to reach the earth? Why are goat droppings so small? Why are bubbles round in shape and not square?

There is a lot of play, both indoor and outdoor through the school day. Board games , chess, carrom and cricket are played with great gusto. Younger children also play with blocks and Montessori materials. Many play traditional games, such as kabaddi, namak chor, coconut, billa, readyeee, lupa chuppi, ek do, sisal patti, ghar ghar, baati (marbles). Swinging from the rafters, improvising locally available materials such as leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, twigs, insects, stones, pieces of tile etc., into 'toys' keeps the children engaged for hours on end. Free play and the slide are all time favourites.



Clockwise from top left: Figuring it out the Montessori way; children engrossed in fixing a jigsaw puzzle; the slide, an all-time favourite; Racing chakris made with flowers and twigs

Friday begins with a group singing session, for all children who wish to sing. After this, it's time for school cleaning, repair, maintenance and stock taking when the brooms, buckets, tubs, mugs and dusters are counted. Ceilings are cleared of cobwebs, minor repairs of toys and learning materials undertaken, floors given a fresh coat of cow-dung. All the hectic housekeeping is rewarded at about 10-30 am with puffed rice, roasted black gram, a seasonal fruit, dry dates and any goodies a visitor may have brought for the children.



The floor gets its weekly coat of cow-dung slurry ►



Song and music times at Imlee Mahuaa

Friday being the weekly haat day, a couple of children from the pottery class along with Milan, head to the market around 11am to sell their wares and a few others on rotation will also go along to shop for the weekly stock of green rations and necessary supplies. The younger ones stay back to play or catch up on backlogs if any. It is also the day when all the recyclable and non-biodegradable garbage is loaded on to a scooter to be taken to Kondagaon, the nearest town 13 km away.

Saturdays are looked forward to by all as the entire school day is spent outdoors. The two junior groups take off separately on a picnic to the hill or jungle, walking-talking-playing-climbing-swinging , exploring, experiencing, observing, playing a round or two of board games, tasting seasonal wild fruits and berries, collecting things of interest such as a pebble or a flower or a seed. They return after a picnic lunch. The older ones go on a short or long cycle trip that may take them to a nearby village/town, a place of historical, cultural or civic significance or a natural landscape. A round trip could involve riding their bicycles for 20 to 50 km. All take the Sunday break to reinvigorate, rest, prepare for the forthcoming week ahead.

With a constant stream of visitors, regular school excursions, the abundance of library books and the keenness shown by children to read them the school has ensured that children are exposed to a different reality that goes much beyond the 3Rs.



The weekly picnic: juniors swing from prop roots and seniors set out for a day trip on their bicycles

Adivasi life in Balenga Para and its surrounds⁵

Modernity not yet having fully arrived here one can still observe a way of life that is closely connected to nature. Life is delinked from a monetised economy to a certain extent. The adivasi's nutritional needs are met by a combination of foraging, hunting, trapping, fishing, farming and animal rearing. The adivasi's life is closely connected to the forests.

Almost every home has a yard, a shed or pen for animals (cattle, pigs and poultry are reared), a dedicated space for simple tools and equipment, a storage space for grain and food stocks. Around the home grow pumpkins and gourds, tubers, banana, custard apple, papaya, lemons, guava, kadi patta, a variety of beans, roselle (gongura/ambadi), chilli and even sugarcane.



Paddy storage



Gourds in the front yard



Home garden diversity

5. This section is in brief and contains mainly those aspects of life in these villages, which could have a bearing on school education.

Paddy, millets, black gram, horse gram are grown. The diet gets a further nutritional boost from forest foods – mushroom, tender bamboo shoot, seasonal wild berries and fruits, honey (collected by smoking out the bees), a variety of edible leafy greens, tamarind, many types of insects, red ant larvae (*chapoda*) and grubs.

Foraging and gathering is supplemented by hunting small prey such as jungle birds and fowl, frogs, field mice, snakes, monitor lizard, hare and occasionally other small mammals such as monkey, wild cat, wild dog, fox. With plenty of ponds dotting the landscape and rivulets criss-crossing the countryside, water chestnut, fish, crabs, shrimp, snails and other molluscs are part of regular diet. Any surplus, especially mushrooms, fish, meat, chilli is smoked over the kitchen fire on a suspended bamboo platform and stocked either for personal use, sharing or for sale when some cash is required.



Bamboo frame set over the hearth for smoking fish, chilli, mushroom etc.

The flowers of the fabled mahua are gathered, dried and stocked for a year round supply of home brew –the heady sacred drink *mandh* as well as for sale to traders. The date palm is tapped for its *seendh salphi* while the fishtail palm yields *rukh salphi*. Beer made from rice powder from germinated paddy (known as *landa*) is brewed in most homes. All these intoxicating drinks are consumed at home, at community events and festival s near places of worship or at the weekly *haat* (bazaar) for good health and good cheer. Interestingly, cattle are reared as farm animals mostly for their dung and meat. Adivasis believe the milk is for the calf, a reflection of their innate sensitivity and wisdom.



Clockwise from top: Tapping toddy from a palm, Drumming in the temple yard during the community meal at festival time; Cattle shed with elevated floor to allow rainwater to flow beneath



Not all relationships of exchange are monetary in nature, barter of goods and services still exist. For example, there is no monetary exchange for the services rendered by the blacksmith. After the harvest, the blacksmith and his wife travel to all the villages where his services were rendered. They visit each home where they may be invited to a meal besides being given some paddy and black gram lentils.

Likewise a special day is held for the *guniya* (the medicine man who treats ailments with traditional herbs) or the *sirha* (shaman who calls on spirits). The villagers who were treated by either of them bring whatever was promised to the spirit at the time of the treatment. If these are animals, then they are sacrificed and the entire community partakes of the feast.

Co-operation amongst families is very strong; helping each other during occasions of births, marriage, death etc. Families contribute paddy, black gram lentils, and some *mandh* (mahua alcohol), as well as assist with making plates and cups with the leaves of the sal tree.



An adivasi mother and her children



Making leaf bowls: a skill learnt at the ghotul

The adivasis of these villages are a very warm people and are courteous and shy with visitors. Voices are hardly ever raised except to herd animals or to call out to someone at a distance. Adults treat children with much respect, and individuality is respected. Parent child interactions are largely egalitarian in nature, and adivasi children are brought up in a family and community atmosphere of sharing and co-operation.

From an early age, children are not coerced into doing anything, not even helping in the home. Young children learn by observing adults around them and participating in activities in playful ways - fetching water from the hand pump alongside their mother, neighbours or older siblings, attending to household tasks, tending the garden, attending to animals, collection of mahua flowers, fuelwood, dung; repairs around the house, etc.

Being egalitarian, the power structures within the community are minimal, the head-man hardly distinguishable by dress and conduct from the rest of the community. Women enjoy equal rights as men and their wishes are always respected, especially with regards to alliances, as well as separation. Although the older generation still continues to drape in traditional ways the younger generation has switched to contemporary ways of dressing in the now familiar salwar-kuta and shirt-trousers common across India.



Like mother, like daughter: learning through imitation

Ghotul: requiem to a learning tradition lost

Until 2009 the late evenings in Balenga Para saw a small group of adolescent girls head towards a prominent structure opposite Imlee Mahuaa. Quietly cleaning the premises and then heading home, only to return after dinner in larger numbers with bedding, comb, datun (a twig toothbrush) and some sal leaves for rolling a tobacco beedi for their male counterparts. Some time prior to this the young unmarried men from the village would have arrived with their musical instruments and other essentials.

This was the ghotul, an ancient adivasi institution of which every young non-school going and unmarried adolescent or young adult was a member. It was run by the young, for the young on terms of operation that were handed down from generation to generation with suitable amendments. Attendance was compulsory for all; girls being excused on menstruation days. At the ghotul, there was dance and music every evening, allowing the younger members to learn from the older ones. The members were also responsible for partaking in a host of community activities (like weeding the fields, house repairs and construction, cleaning and repair of roofs; organising supplies, fuelwood, leaf plates, and cooking for festivals, marriages, funerals). If a member wished to leave the village for any purpose the permission of the ghotul was needed.

It was also a place for safe and sanctioned physical exploration. There was the unwritten rule that emotional involvement was strictly prohibited, any sign of which attracted stern reprimands and even banishment from the ghotul. Only in the rare case of a pregnancy were relationships sealed in marriage. All slept in the ghotul, girls departing first much before sunrise and the boys heading home around dawn.

The ghotul fell victim to external pressures that made inroads into Balenga Para⁶. The closing of the institution has meant the loss of an avenue of learning relevant skills. The youth are now tempted to leave the village, and the community support role that the members played is now largely diminished.



*The abandoned ghotul
at Balenga Para*

6. At the time of finalizing this report, the authors were informed that the ghotul in Balenga Para was restarted in March 2016 after a gap of 6 years. The reasons stated: the community realized that the support from the ghotul had diminished, the young boys who left the village seeking a daily wage were cheated, and the quality of song and dance skills (which Balenga Para was recognised for) had gone down.

Laughter seems to have a special place in the adivasi life. Adults laugh with gay abandon, sometimes tease younger children who may in turn tease adults back. It appears that they are a happy and satisfied people, even though by conventional standards they would appear to be poor.

Energy and laughter were the currencies of this new land, and the beat of a drum its pulse. Not many recognized the worth and genuineness of these currencies.....

~Madhu Ramnath in Woodsmoke and Leaf cups – Autobiographical footnotes to the anthropology of the Durwa~

Special aspects of the school

1) REFLECTIONS OF THE ADIVASI WAY OF LIFE IN THE LIFE AT SCHOOL

Many aspects of Imlee Mahuaa are in consonance with the kind of life and upbringing the child has within its family. The school is fully conscious of the fact that its ways should keep as close as possible to the adivasi way of engaging with children.

Freedom at home, freedom in school

Children are free from any coercion from parents and adult relatives. How they spend their day, what they do is met with very little supervision. Children here take their own decisions. There is however an instinctive eye kept on them by the adults in the community such that they are safe from coming to physical harm, in particular near the village pond, the streams or a particular lonely stretch in the village.



One may infer this subtlety and tentativeness comes from being comfortable with one's inner self, largely as yet, uncorrupted by the artificial ways of the world. It could be an indication of an approach to life based on the implicit conviction of actions being aligned to one's innate nature. In the absence of duality, freedom and responsibility become second nature.



The children in Imlee Mahuaa are free to decide how to spend their day. They are not forced into any activity, not even academic study. A child may spend the entire day in free-play or playing many of their local games, outdoor (cricket, volley ball) or indoor games (chess, carrom, knots-and-crosses), or may spend it observing other classes or others at play/work. Children decide what they would like to study and when. They decide if they need the assistance of an adult, or an older child or a peer. All learning is self-motivated and self-directed.



From top: Having learnt, it is now time to teach the younger ones; Children playing carrom; Seniors' self-study being keenly observed by a junior

Freedom to spend time at school as per one's wish was first given to Soorajmukhi. Subsequently, in late 2015, children from the other groups expressed a wish to have the same freedom. This was discussed at a school meeting.



Gautam and Milan raised doubts in the meeting as they both felt that the younger children might not know how to use this freedom in school. After a lot of discussion it was decided that this freedom would be given to all, and reviewed after a period of six months.

The concept of freedom in school is one that the three adult members of the school don't fully agree on. Milan thinks the freedom at school may be their undoing when they grow up, "I am not for it. The children play now but it will be difficult for them when they grow up."

Gautam on the other hand has tried to assert his stand in some ways, which is clearly noticeable in his didactic approach, "Initially I too thought it was *ajeeb*, this freedom, especially when one thinks from parents' point of view, but actually this freedom is good, and needs to be there. But from parent expectations' point of view, it is different. Sometimes, though, I wonder if in the future children will regret having spent their time in school playing and not studying. There are about 4 to 6 kids in my group of 15 who ask for classes. The children in my class did struggle initially to read and I took classes for them and now they can read a bit on their own...

"We like this freedom. That children study when they want to. There are no exams, but now-a-days even the government schools don't have exams."

~Gunuraam Netaam,
Jamuna's father~

"I feel the girls in Soorajmukhi have progressed, they are doing well and are responsible. There is a difference with the boys. Not sure if the boys would have done better with some structured classes. Girls have a lot of responsibility at home, so maybe it is a habit that they have developed. But the boys at this age don't have that much home responsibility." (Implying it may have been better to do things differently with the boys.)

Bhupesh Tiwari of SAATHI, who has worked with the adivasis of Bastar for decades, believes, "It is not necessary that you learn only within the four walls of a classroom. Once you allow the child to do whatever he or she wants to do, and then you teach something, the child will remember that better. If the child's mind is outside the boundary of the classroom, and you are trying to teach something to the child, the child will not learn."

Says Prayaag, "Freedom is a given for all of us here, we thrive in it and suffocate when it is curtailed. So is collective and consultative decision making."

At the time of writing this report, the children took the decision to have the freedom to choose their teacher, who could be any of the adults, the older children or educational resources in the school. This aspect came up during one of the discussions in the school. The understanding is that if children ask for a certain class, it will be accommodated if that particular individual has the time and the interest.

Anyone can offer to teach something new. If the offer is made, anyone can sign up for the class.

Democracy, a way of life

In a democratic country it would be imperative that democratic values like equality, acceptance of differences, co-operation, and justice are imbued by its citizens. Homes, neighbourhoods and schools are places where children can find opportunities to imbibe and practice such values. Unfortunately in India, most schools find it convenient to continue with archaic hierarchical autocracy. Democratic functioning is hardly practiced even though the National Curriculum Framework 2005 advocates it.

In Balenga Para and its neighbouring villages, in keeping with adivasi culture, the entire community comes together to take decisions that have a bearing on life outside the family. When such a gathering takes place, no one is excluded from attending these meetings. When the village community at Balenga Para met to discuss the proposal of a school way back in 2007, the group consisted of not just adults; children and the elderly were also present.



The whole school participates in decision making

In keeping with this spirit of collective decision making⁷, all decisions pertaining to the school operations in Imlee Mahuaa are taken by the entire school community i.e all the 60 children and the 3 adults. When a decision has to be taken or some issue has to be discussed, a meeting is held with all children and adults. Every individual has a vote. If there is no complete agreement then one of the following is attempted: discuss it to try to get a consensus; postpone decision if the ones in the minority are not at all happy with it; take the decision for a limited period of time to see how it works. Decisions taken are periodically reviewed by all the children and adults together.

So many schools flirt with democracy... a little bit. But for me democracy is like pregnancy...you can't be a little bit.

~Daniel Greenberg, Sudbury Valley School~

The kind of decisions that the children are involved in cover all school operations and vary from setting up timetables, reviewing holidays, deciding which children would go on a long educational trip, rotation of school duties and so on encompassing even their subjects of study. The children's decisions are always taken seriously, and underlying this is the trust that young children can take responsible decisions for themselves.

Flexibility with school absenteeism and timings

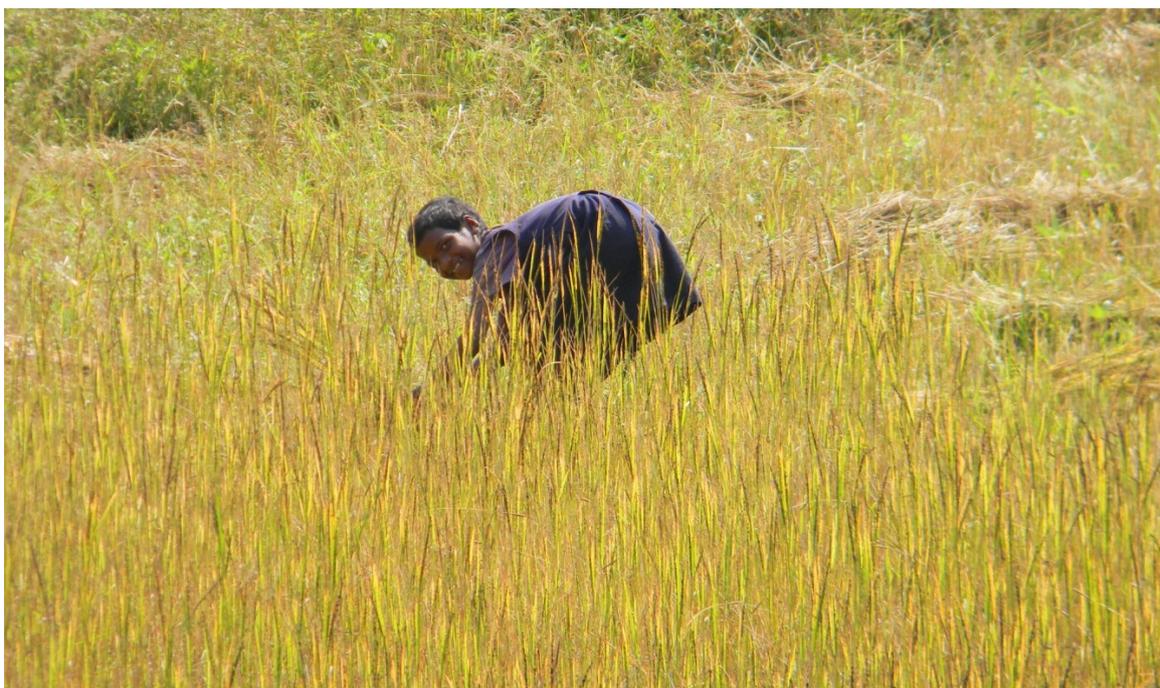
Children of adivasi families learn from their parents, siblings, other relatives and community members. This happens naturally without any conscious instruction and through imitation, observation, participation and trial and error. Formal schooling often comes in the way of children learning from their community and elders by just being in their midst. Recognising this fact, Imlee Mahuaa was planned as a non-residential school, unlike the government Ashram Shalas or private residential schools where the children live away from their families. There is also great flexibility in a number of aspects of its schooling as compared to other schools.

7. Collective decision making may not happen within the home.

Sometimes a child does not show up at school because s/he did not want to attend school. There is no parental pressure to attend if a child does not feel like it; at most a parent may inquire casually why the child is at home.

At Imlee Mahuaa there is no reprimand for absenteeism, although during attendance one among them may report the reason for someone being away from school. Children may be absent for a number of reasons.

Both men and women are involved in agricultural work. While men usually do the ploughing, all other tasks like sowing, weeding, application of manure, harvesting etc., are done by either or by both. Children help in agricultural activities (especially pre-sowing, weeding, harvesting) and little children as young as nine years deftly use the sickle to harvest paddy.



A student of Imlee Mahuaa helps her family with harvesting paddy in their farm

Intermittent breaks in farm work are spent hunting, which is undertaken by the males in small groups. Young boys often accompany their fathers on these expeditions. House construction, repairing roofs, pig slaughter, tree cutting is again a male activity, while collecting fuel wood, cow-dung for maintenance of floors (both as coat and antiseptic), minor repairs to walls and parapets, creating decorative motifs in and around the house are done by women. Brick making is an activity that the entire family gets involved in.

The school is after all an artificially structured learning environment. Therefore it must assume only a subsidiary role in comparison with a naturally available and more robust learning space such as the home.

~Prayaag Joshi~



Gathering mahuaa flowers, keeping vigil to guard the flowers from being eaten by animals, collecting tendu leaves and tamarind are undertaken collectively. Collecting various grasses and reeds for making brooms, mats and baskets is done by women while bamboo is brought in by the males.

◀ *Brooms for the home are made from reed and grass collected mostly by women and children*

The children pick up all these life skills from their adults.

School timings in Imlee Mahuaa are also flexible. No bells are rung and no gates are closed. Children are free to come to and leave school at any time of the day. This means that the boys could help with farm work or even with cooking at home. The girls could help to fetch water from the hand pump or cook the morning meal. During menstruation these tasks are taken over by other children in the home or by the husband.

The fact that the school is not inflexible and is accommodating to different situations and needs makes the school an attractive place for the children.

Where however, attendance does count, is in the annual scholarships paid by APCT to every child into a Public Provident Fund account started by the Trust. The mother of the child is a joint account holder. A stipulated amount is deposited in every account, the total amount being decided on the class that the child is in. The amount deposited is linked to the child's attendance (a minimum of 90% for full scholarship). While there may be a seeming anomaly with the flexibility with attendance, the monetary benefit is available to the child on the same lines as the other benefits are if s/he attends school (books, milk, fruit, etc). The scholarship has not been a motivation to attend school. Attendance is decided by other factors, and primarily by what else the family is involved in at that time.

The rules for adults too are minimal. Salary is linked to the hours that one commits to school and not to any formal degree or skill sets. The adults have an understanding that a leave of absence would be availed only when needed and that at any given time at least two of them would be present in school.

Co-operation and not competition

Since the adivasi way of life is one of sharing and co-operation (Nandini, S. 2009-2010), with families getting together to help each other on various occasions, the same spirit is seen in the school. Imlee Mahuaa has consciously stayed away from participating in any competitive event, like inter-school sports competitions. Even within the school, no activity takes a competitive nature.



The adivasi way of life is one of sharing and co-operation

The spirit of helping was evident when the school moved from operating in two shifts to a single one. In the former, all children were given lunch at school. However when all children started coming in at the same time, it was not possible to cook for over 60 persons. This was discussed and while most children agreed to bring their own lunch, a few children indicated that it would be difficult for them. In this discussion many children and adults offered to bring a little extra every day. Extra meals are being cooked at school too, which takes care of those who are not able to bring their lunch.

Mealtimes at Imlee Mahuaa

The entire school eats together. This is a time when there is much informal chatter and bustle. A classroom or the central open assembly space is where all gather for meals. Earlier in the morning, two large aluminum vessels would have been filled with water by the juniors and placed near the washing area. The senior group busies itself in the kitchen, filling the exact number of tall steel glasses with pasteurised milk out of tetra packs. The exact number of seasonal fruit is given a thorough scrub a couple of times in water and carried in a steel bucket or plate to the dining area. The jar with dry dates goes along, so do the pressure cookers with rice and dal and the wok with the vegetable, all prepared by Milan for guests, himself and resident members on campus. There may be a green salad or a pickle sometimes.

Lunch time sees all lunch boxes open with everyone seated on the floor in a large circle. Siblings may sometimes sit side by side to share a common lunch box. The children's lunch boxes almost always contain rice along with a considerably spicy gravy consistency vegetable dish of greens, tubers, potato, tomato, gourd, pumpkin, beans, mushroom etc., with or without a lentil but always with a dash of tamarind.

The container with the veggie is examined and a variety of uninhibited expressions cross the children's faces. Then it's time to either help yourself to as much as is required or make a great pretence of serving (in deference to your mother's efforts back home), pushing the container towards your neighbour and waiting in hope that something more appetising will come your way. Lunch boxes do a merry-go-round. This way everyone gets a chance to sample a bit from everybody's lunch, and there is a good chance that what you did not find particularly exciting would be finished by the time your container shows up in front of you again.

Every one, without exception, has to have their quota of milk, fruit and dry dates. There is no fuss here. However, it can give the seniors some anxious moments if a fruit or two or a couple of glasses of milk are left unclaimed for they are so sure of having got the numbers right that it can only happen if somebody has not got their share or avoided it deliberately. It's no mean victory to find the culprit who in all innocence may be attending to a pressing task on campus.

All children clean their own lunch box and glass, meticulously scrubbing with mud in the courtyard by the banana plants, lending a helping hand to one another in much merriment. The popular scrubber is a small strip of banana leaf or a bit of dry hay which works better than any readymade scrubber available in the market. The boxes and glasses are rinsed twice in the huge water tubs and put away. It is time for the younger lot to go back to play or for a relaxed sprawl in a shady spot and for the older children to tidy up the dining area, replenish used-up water, put away everything before going back to their respective activity. The neighbour's brood of fowl also keep to these meal times so do a couple of dogs. They are mostly ignored or allowed to have their pick at the degradable garbage heap.



2) LEARNING SKILLS AND GAINING KNOWLEDGE IN SCHOOL RELEVANT TO ADULT LIFE

Skills that link with basic needs

Imlee Mahuaa decided to have activities in the school that relate directly to one's physical needs of food (*roti*), clothing (*kapada*) and shelter (*makaan*).

For the *roti* part the children have been involved in shopping for kitchen supplies, kitchen gardening, pickle making, and cooking. Some activities like gardening are done everyday by whoever chooses to do it (freedom of choice!), and some like shopping are weekly at the village *haat* . Cooking and pickle making happens once in a while. Cooking may also happen spontaneously like the day when everyone decided to make a *kheer* out of the three gigantic gourds that were harvested from the school garden.

Children learn to spin with the *takli* and *charkha* from Gautam with keen interest. Boys and girls routinely mend their clothes usually in one of the classrooms or in the store room in pairs or small groups. They have even tried their hand at embroidery which one sees on their school bags and handkerchiefs.



Harvest from the school garden



Vegetables being sold at the village haat



Spinning yarn on the charkha

Children also assist in minor construction work, carpentry, painting, repair and maintenance of the roof and other chores pertaining to the school. The carpenter and mason's offer to train those interested may be taken up by the older children someday.

Vocational cum entrepreneurial programme

Some students of the Surjamukhi group have chosen to do a vocational project, in addition to their school work. As mentioned earlier the options currently available are the following:



At the potter's wheel

Pottery and ceramics: Milan, a traditional potter who honed his skills by doing a training programme offered by SAATHI , teaches pottery to two children who have signed up for the vocational class. Under his guidance, the children are involved in all tasks right from bringing the clay in a tractor to school to preparing the clay, making the items, firing to sales as well as deciding on pricing and accounts. The children are learning to make a number of items, some linked to what families buy during festivals: *diyas* for Diwali; *kalas* for Navratri; small bull figures with wheels attached to the legs for Nava (a local festival); *gamlas* and *handis*. On Fridays, he accompanies the children to the *haat* to sell whatever is ready. Milan feels that both the children have the potential to become potters later in life.



Pottery Items



Milan taking a pottery class

School teaching and Entrepreneurship: Four students have opted for this. These student-teachers help the children of Sapri and Semar in their academic work. The little children are comfortable in their presence and conversations and explanations happen in the local language.

There is a review meeting every day with all the vocational students and a monthly review of the progress made and for building specific subject skills. The student-teachers are given a free hand in their work with the younger children.



An older child teaching a younger one

The students are also exposed to some aspects of running a school. Every year in early April, two students accompany Prayaag to Delhi to NCERT to obtain the needed school textbooks, and then on to Chennai to be part of the annual audit of APCT. They also go to Kondagaon on Fridays to get familiarised with banking and other procedures that are involved in running a school.

When we interviewed children many of them said that they would like to be teachers when they grow up. Dulaari, one of the student teachers, said that she would like to teach in Imlee Mahuaa later in life. The long-term plan is to run Imlee Mahuaa till 2030 when the informal lease of the land will expire, but Prayaag feels that it is possible that some children like Dulaari (who has a passion for learning and teaching) may take over the running of the school even earlier.

Library and Book Shop: Four students have opted for this. The library is open from 3 pm to 4 pm three times a week for all children, including children from the neighbourhood government school. This class is very popular with all, and the children in charge handle the work with professional efficiency. Mending damaged books, sorting, grading, maintaining records of issue and return is their responsibility. Children read for an hour in the room and also regularly issue books to take home. These four children have independently worked out all systems in the library, including how to keep track of borrowed books. There are about 200 books for issue and about 100 to 150 books in the reading room currently. Of the 500 books

In English Bhaiya read out parts from a book on Miss Moore, a librarian. He read out what was on the cover page to us. The blurb said that in America there were no libraries for children in olden days. Ms. Moore thought that children should read books, and that they should have a separate room, and chairs and tables their size, the room should be warm, and that they should be able to take the books home. Those days people felt that children should not read books, especially girls, and that children will not handle books properly.

~Translated from Hindi from a group interview with Mamta, Ranoti, Sandaay, Nehaa, Simran, Dulaari, Bindeshwari, Aseetaa, Jamunaa, Seemaa, Chandrikaa~

still to be systematised, about 50 are introduced into the library or reading room per month.

Learning from excursions

The students undertake a variety of trips which provide experiences from which much learning for life takes place. The older children have been to the Panchayat office twice to have discussions with the Panchayat members to understand issues related to their villages. The older children undertake cycling trips on some Saturdays when they travel away from their village to neighbouring areas.

Besides a trip to Sevagram that every child will make once during her or his schooling years, the

older students go on an annual two to three week excursion accompanied by a couple of teachers and one or two parents. This is seen as valuable exposure as children get to experience life in a big city, see places of educational, cultural, natural and recreational interest, negotiate with strangers as they travel, live in apartments, learn to operate gadgets commonly used in urban households, see how children live and learn in other parts of the country and in other geographical regions like the Himalayas and Rajasthan. This exposure helps children learn how to negotiate in other social and economic realities and be assertive when the situation demands it. These are subtle ways of learning, which could stand them in good stead in their adulthood. The current experience of adults who leave the village for work outside is one of being cheated in different ways. Hopefully these children will be better equipped as adults to handle the outside world.

Over the last 7 to 8 years we can see the confidence of the children increase. These were children who ran away earlier on seeing people from outside.

~SAATHI staff~

While we (the authors) were in Imlee Mahuaa, we happened to visit Golawan, where work was being done by a network of farmers in saving traditional seed varieties. We suggested that the older children in the school could benefit from an exposure to this work. Within two months of our visit, the older children cycled there and spent two days interacting with the members of the network.

3) SCHOOL LINK WITH THE COMMUNITY

Imlee Mahuaa is closed if there is a death in Balenga Para. The members of the school feel that the “school is a riot of happy activity” and that it would be insensitive to keep it open in the midst of a sad demise. The village is a close-knit community, and everyone is present on happy or sad occasions. The adults and most students of the school understand that if there is a death in the village, the joyous sounds that emanate from the school through the day may be jarring. This reflects the school’s sensitivity to the sentiments of the resident community.

Imlee Mahuaa functions for half a day on Friday to allow children to go to the weekly haat. This is a day when all families would make their way to the market, either to make purchases for the week or to sell raw, semi processed or processed edible items, pottery, handy tools, brooms, mats baskets, poultry, eggs and sometimes even larger animals. In government schools, children are often absent on haat days. In recognition of the importance of the weekly market and the ties it has with the families, the school functions only for half the day.

Community outreach

Imlee Mahuaa offers basic medical care for minor ailments to all in Balenga Para and surrounding villages. Cases needing professional medical treatment are attended to at Jagdalpur under APCT’s sponsorship. For instance, Shankar, a student of the school who lost his leg in a freak accident was helped to obtain a Jaipur foot (artificial foot).

The repair of the village hand pump and the roof of the bathing facility was supported by Imlee Mahuaa. All children were given a solar powered lamp so also every home in Balenga Para. This was prior to electricity coming to the village in 2014.



Shankar, with a Jaipur foot

Children conducted an awareness campaign on the ill effects of chewing tobacco and offered gum substitutes to kick the habit. It met with some success.

The most significant contribution to date to the community around them seems to be extending the library facilities to the children of the government school in Balenga Para. The timings of the library was shifted to the afternoon when the children learnt that the government school children could not make it earlier. Also Imlee Mahuaa students have gone from home to home to encourage the children from government schools to visit their library.



Children from the government school in Balenga Para at the Imlee Mahuaa library

This initiative is a great success. There are children from the government school who now come regularly to the library. The opening up of doors is also significant because it is not a one-off activity but one that is ongoing and which could make some of the children lovers of books, as well as help broaden their horizons through reading.

Prayaag feels that the community outreach has been an area where more needs to be done. He feels the need for addressing issues on a long term (e.g. addressing the garbage issues at the haat or in Balenga Para). He also sees the importance of interacting more with the government school in the village. One way of doing this could be by extending invitations to some children when Imlee Mahuaa plans an excursion or even a cycling trip.

4) INCULCATING A CONCERN FOR OTHERS LESS PRIVILEGED

The excursions undertaken with the older children have always included attempts to raise awareness about environmental or social issues. Trips have so far included visits to Bhopal where they interacted with groups that work with the Bhopal Gas Tragedy victims; Barefoot College in Tilonia and MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatan) in Rajasthan and to Delhi where they interacted with groups working with children of commercial sex workers, runaway children and homeless people.

5) INSTILLING A SENSE OF SELF WORTH AND CONFIDENCE

There are a number of demeaning experiences that young adivasi children in India have faced, starting from the time they entered school. The head master or the class teacher often changed the names of the children. Adivasi names sounded strange to non-advansi teachers who were usually from outside the region, and rather than respect this diversity, the teachers often humiliated the children by assigning new names to them. This is exactly what happened in colonial India, when many British nuns refused to call Indian children by their Indian names and changed them to English ones.

The non-Adivasi teachers here (government run institutions) often call out to tribal children as Muriya or bastariya, meaning "foolish person".

~SAATHI staff~

After being stripped of their identity, adivasi children continued to face retorts about their language, about their so-called backwardness. Their school experiences led them to believe that they were inherently stupid, resulting in great diffidence. (Ramdas, B. 2013)

The Article 350 (A) of the Constitution declares, 'It shall be the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups and the President may issue such directions to any State as he considers necessary or proper for securing the provision of such facilities.'

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) states that "The first concern of the school is on the development of the child's language competence: issues related to articulation and literacy, and the ability to use language to create, to think and to communicate with others. Special stress is needed to ensure that there are maximum opportunities for those who wish to study in their mother tongue, including tribal languages and linguistic pockets, even if the number of students is small."

Even though a decade has passed since the development of this framework document produced by the NCERT, very little or nothing has unfortunately changed on the ground. That children, in their early years, learn best in their mother-tongue is a known fact blatantly ignored by our educational institutions. There has been no effective policy on multi-lingual instruction and no model of language instruction that helps a child cross the barrier from the adivasi languages spoken at home to the dominant state language chosen as the medium of instruction.

What compounds the language problem is the fact that the teachers recruited to Ashram Shalas do not speak the adivasi language. They are mostly non-advasis recruited from outside who cannot communicate with the children in their class rooms in a language that is understood by the child. So when a little child first enters school, the child is bewildered and scared as s/he does not understand what the teacher is saying. The National Focus Group on Indian Languages, recommends that it should be "essential to engage teachers who know the tribal language as well." (NCERT 2006)

Chhattisgarh, with over 30% tribal population in the state, has had some experiments with producing text books in adivasi dialects. These text books have serious limitations, with depictions in them being urban and non-advasi (Veerbhadranaika P et al 2012).

Language instruction in Imlee Mahuaa

The families of the children of Imlee Mahuaa speak Gondi or Halbi or both. Halbi is the language of the Halbas, a scheduled tribe that is often mistaken as lower-caste Hindus. It is an Indo-Aryan language and very different from Gondi which is a Dravidian language spoken by the Gonds. There seems to be a hierarchy of languages of the four that are used in this region, and in decreasing order of importance subscribed to them, they are Hindi, Chhattisgarhi, Halbi and Gondi.

The children from Kokodi village do not speak any Gondi. The children from the other villages may speak Gondi at home or amongst each other. However, all children speak Halbi. It is a language that is relatively easy to learn, so even the occasional child who has not spoken it before coming to Imlee Mahuaa learns it soon. Both Halbi and Gondi do not have their own script.

In the initial two years, driven by the expectations of the parents, the school had enforced a rule about speaking only in English while in school. Very soon, however, the adults realised their mistake, especially noting that the children did not look happy. From then on, Hindi and English were used. Yet again, the adults came to realise that language was still an issue. That is when children were allowed to use any language they wished to.

To encourage the use of the local languages, assemblies were held in these languages and children sang songs and told stories in them. Prayaag learnt both the languages, often with help

from the children. As the Sapri group is taught by the student-teachers, the little ones do not face a language issue.

The children of Semar and Soorajmukhi write their own bi-annual appraisal reports. These are in the form of a letter to their parents, explaining what they have done in school in the last few months. The reports are written in Halbi and children decorate its cover page with their art work. A photocopy of the *letter* remains with the school, while the original is kept at home, in a plastic file cover given by the school. The adults write the reports of the other children. All reports are written in Halbi and this also enables parents to understand them.

At the stage of finalising this draft, we heard that the school is considering entering the school as a Halbi medium school in the Education office records.

Learning not a demeaning experience

The adults in Imlee Mahuaa accept the different learning abilities of the children with no extra attention or praise for anyone who may excel in academic work. The children are first generation school going learners, and there is full acceptance of the child if s/he is not enthused by academic work. There is no pressure to perform well, no exams, no experiences of failure and no labelling. This is in keeping with the adivasi way of life where co-operation and not competition is the norm.

In many ways Imlee Mahuaa has lived up to the original meaning of the word “school”, which means leisure, a meaning that has been lost over centuries of rigidity, discipline and didactic instruction. Schools now are singularly focused on academic achievement at the cost of every other aspect of a child’s lived experience, robbing them of a normal, happy, healthy, safe, secure and care-free childhood.

6) ECOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY

A school that is so far removed from almost all forms of so called progress and development leaves a negligible ecological footprint. Water is used sparingly as it is carried to school in buckets from the village hand pump. Electricity came to the school only in Feb 2015 and is very minimally used when available. All children either walk or cycle to school.

Even so, there is still an attempt to minimize Imlee Mahuaa’s impact on the environment. Dishes are cleaned largely with mud, detergent being reserved for very oily utensils or the large cookers. The water that drains from the washing area leads to a small patch of plants. School purchases are being made in bulk to reduce the packaging material in an attempt to reduce non-biodegradable waste. The waste generated is taken once a week to Kondagaon, as the village has no system of waste disposal.

Again the school acted on a suggestion we made very quickly about replacing regular sanitary napkins procured from the market with reusable cloth ones. Sanitary napkins were made available at school for young girls to use if they so wished, as it was found that school attendance dropped during menstruation. These have now been replaced with reusable cloth ones thereby eliminating the recurring issue of disposal.

There was also a brief discussion with the adults on the Forest Rights Act⁸ and the importance of introducing the older children to some of its provisions. It was decided that as soon as the children are ready for this, sessions would be held with the help of people working on these issues.

8. Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, popularly referred to as the Forest Rights Act

Conclusion

Imlee Mahuaa has clearly tried to adhere to the adivasi ethos in its functioning. They are constantly questioning what happens in school; looking for instances that may, in any way, compromise the children's desirable experiences at school. For the adults, it is the children's happiness and their feeling of security while in school which is of paramount importance.

There is, however, much that can be done and some that can be done differently. Although the school is eager to receive feedback, take cognizance and act on suggestions like in the case of sanitary napkins, the visit to the seed conservation endeavour or the intended discussion with the children on the Forest Rights Act, it may be considered to be wanting in a few areas.

Adivasi communities are a repository of traditional knowledge, a conscious effort to keep this wisdom alive, include it in the curriculum seems to be lacking. The ghotul in Balenga Para closed down for six years and has just been restarted. In most adivasi villages in Central India these ancient institutions of learning have been shut down. It was at the ghotul that the adivasi youth picked up the many skills required in adulthood. Given that school going children are not allowed to be members of the ghotul, and also given the fact that one does not really know for long this tradition will continue in Balenga Para, it is even more important that other learning avenues such as Imlee Mahuaa meet some of these needs to whatever extent possible.

All the adults in the school are male. This may not be intentional, however growing children, we believe, need the influence of both genders in their time spent at school. Remote areas have their limitations, and young women teachers among the adivasi community are hard to come by. The balance seems to be tilted unfairly, which one can hope will be corrected when one or more of the senior girl students return to the school in the capacity of adult members of the school.

However, in conclusion one can say that the school is attempting to find that fine balance between life as it is today in the villages it works in, and equipping children with the necessary skills for an unknown tomorrow. Any organisation, individual or government department working in the interest of adivasi children would benefit from the experience of Imlee Mahuaa.

Beyond that specific relevance, its principles and approach (of respecting diversity, democratised functioning, freedom with responsibility, environmental and social sensitivity, community-learning) are some of the foundations to a more just and equitable society.

Imlee Mahuaa is a bold experiment befitting our times and the community it serves. This community of 63 people are showing us that there could be a different way of doing things, and sometimes these risks are worth taking. The journey is its own justification; any goal arrived at will only add value to the experience.

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