



# A philosophy of learning and living

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*“If nai talim gets imprisoned into a system, it will be killed. If that should happen there will be no room for initiative, and people will spend their time contriving how this piece of knowledge can be correlated with that activity. We must steer clear of that kind of thing.” – Vinoba Bhave, Thoughts on Education*

To understand *nai talim* and its relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is first important and maybe easier to discuss what it is not. It is not a fixed system, method or

curriculum. Nor is it a vocational crafts training program. Nor is it only for rural people.

*Nai talim* is a philosophy of learning and living. It is a call for decolonizing our minds as it holds open our notions of progress, success, freedom, happiness and well-being for critical interrogation. It is also a compass for creating a new politics, new economics, new spiritualities and new non-violent societies. Therefore, it must be continuously re-calibrated and re-imagined in dialectic conversations

with what is happening in the world around us. Narayanbhai Desai once told me that Gandhiji told him that we each need to create our own definitions of *nai talim* in order to keep it relevant and alive. Indeed, if people can create so many different kinds of toothpastes, then why can't we create many forms of *nai talim*?

When conducting a post-mortem on the *nai talim* experiments of the last century (mainly adopted and spread by the government on a large scale in Gujarat), one can

argue that the biggest failure of *nai talim* schools has been their lack of understanding of Gandhiji's Hind Swaraj (swaraj literally means rule over the self, but I prefer a more nuanced poetic framing as harmony of our many selves – with our inner world, with our diverse communities, with the natural worlds). They eventually fell into the trap of accepting modern State-corporate-military-industrial development as their central reference point both intellectually and financially dependent on it. We need to recognize that armies, prisons, factories, and schools are all based on the same basic design of centralizing control. They run on and promote 'institutionalization' i.e., the submission of human conscience, wisdom and love to the will and logic of institutions, rules, authorities.

For *nai talim* to be relevant to the world today, it must be willing to question the frameworks that have until now defined modern education: 1) nationalism and the military state, 2) the paradigm of GDP, money, corporate control and unlimited economic growth, and 3) Western Science and memes of technological utopianism

as the only tools for knowing, understanding and being in the world.

Fundamentally, Swaraj is an invitation to a recovery of the expanded self – a deep-felt desire to transcend the pain of separateness, alienation and fragmentation that was hurled on to the modern world, and to reclaim our profound inter-connectedness with all life. Vinoba Bhave laid out a strong framework of *nai talim* for recovery of the self from institutionalization, "Self sufficiency then has three meanings. The first is that one should not depend on or exploit others for one's daily bread. The second is that one should have developed the power to acquire knowledge for oneself. The third is that man should be able to rule himself, to be aware of his senses and thoughts." To this, I would add a fourth dimension of finding our right relationship as part of Nature. In the West, they are now talking of children suffering from Nature-Deficit-Disorder from being indoors all day and being addicted to video games. Contrary to what modern science has taught us, Nature is diverse, alive, intelligent, conscious and wanting to communicate

with us. We are not separate from nature, but an integral part of it. We need to re-internalize the old adage that what we do to nature, we do to ourselves. This cannot be done by sitting in a classroom all day or in front of TV, using mobiles or tablets.

*Nai talim* was initially envisioned for rural people, but there was never a strong effort to develop a *nai talim* vision for the urban elite.\* The urgent need of the hour would be to develop a discourse on *nai talim* for urban and semi-urban people whose connection with the body, the land, the spirit world, and a sense of community has been severely severed. Vinoba Bhave describes, "We can live rightly only when we earn our livelihood in bodily labour. If we do not do this, we are a burden for other people [and fossil fuels] to carry on their backs, and our lives cannot be free of violence. This is the idea that is the foundation of *nai talim*." Our current factory-schooling system is, however, producing a huge pool of consumerist parasites who are taught the formula that "school = marks = degree = good package = more stuff = happiness." India is slowly realizing that this formula which converts young people to 'human resources' and makes them slaves to the global economy is actually a recipe for massive frustration, depression and societal and ecological breakdown.

Following Narayanbhai Desai's talisman, I have been involved in several educational experiments in urban areas to re-imagine *nai*

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\*My own encounters with the corporate world and global elite have led me to believe that *nai talim* is more important for them than for rural peoples today. *Nai talim* for rural peoples will have to also be re-imagined with a focus on revitalizing a new cultural confidence in rural communities about the value of a rural nature-centered lifestyle and how to resist the onslaught of the global economy.



*talim* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century which all focus on self-designed learning. Three experiments that I would like to mention are Swaraj University, Creativity Adda, and Unschooling my daughter Kanku. In all of these, there is a strong attempt to challenge the dominant school monoculture of competition, compulsion, fragmented knowledge, I.Q., and certification. We start by acknowledging the diversity of multiple intelligences, learning styles, knowledge systems, and natural ecosystems that exist. For us, every child is 'intelligent' and every community has deep creativity and wisdom. We are trying to up new frontiers for who we learn from, how we learn, where we learn, when we learn, what we learn and unlearn.

Vinoba Bhave poetically articulated the soul of *nai talim asyog* (union of individual with the divine), *sahyog* (collaboration), *udyog* (meaningful work). He emphasized the importance of humility. Narayanbhai Desai talked about *Preeti* (love), *Mukti* (responsible freedom), *Abhivyakti* (expressions). Satish Kumar talks about soil, soul and society. In our work in Shikshantar, we have added unlearning, gift culture, jugaad design thinking as some of the key dimensions of *nai talim*.

We not only have to reclaim the organic connections between the head and the heart, the hands and the home (nature), but today even control of the 'head' is under siege as our minds and lives become increasingly controlled by the processes of 'digitization'. There are more mobile phones in India than toilets. Under such scenarios, pedagogies of 'unplugging' will be increasingly important to reclaim our consciousness as whole beings. Re-plugging into the pregnant power of 'community' is also a critical aspect for *nai*



*talim*. We have very limited power to influence larger systems as individuals. New and viable political, economic and cultural movements will depend on a strong foundation of communities. In our work, I have found that skills of engaging with and transforming conflict, rebuilding 'commons' and sharing economy, and co-creating through accessing our collective intelligence are important to develop.

Creativity Adda Commercial School is a democratic free 'unschool' which runs every day from 2-5pm in the heart of a government school in Dariya Ganj, Old Delhi. The mission is to connect 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> class students with their passions and practical skills and to stimulate their intrinsic motivation, cultural confidence, curiosity, self-discipline, emotional development and creativity through a project-based learning approach. There is a strong focus on the arts and music, urban organic farming, slow food cooking, designing different products, social entrepreneurship, emotional well-being and leadership. One of the projects the kids have initiated is the Dariya Dil Slow Food Community Café, which they organize and run together at the school. Indeed, food – how we

grow it, what seeds we use, our relationship with the farmer and what we put into our mouths – will be a major theme across India for *nai talim*. We hope that kids can see that there are many ways to earn a livelihood and contribute to the well-being of their community. We see the Adda experiment as a radical virus inserted into the mainstream education system.

Swaraj University is a two year higher education program, based in Udaipur, where 17-30 year old youths join as 'khojis' to work on their dreams. The focus is on self, sustainability, social justice and regenerative livelihoods. Emotionally and spiritually healing ourselves from the violence of schooling and modernity is a central feature. The program is conducted in Hindi. Our campus is on an organic farm in a village with community living and reconnecting with nature as essential learning conditions. Each khoji designs his or her own unique syllabus. They get to choose their mentors, regardless of academic qualifications. We have even had illiterate tribal fisherman, farmers, folk musicians and street children as our faculty. The khojis are also taken on learning journeys to many modern places like dump sites, factory farms, mines, and tribal communities, etc. to understand the costs of modern development. During the program, there is strong support for the khojis to start up their own social enterprises which help regenerate their communities and ecosystems – we emphasize people, planet and profit. The khojis have started projects in organic farming, solar energy, nature conservation and eco-trekking, designing products from waste, filmmaking, dance therapy, pranic healing, etc. We envision our khojis to be job creators for others, rather than job beggars. Many of them are also

supporting other young and old people to reconnect with their passions. The two-year process can be seen as an important rite of passage for bringing youth into the responsibilities of adult-hood, which involves much more than just making money or advancing one's personal career. This initiative is proud to be 100 per cent undeemed and unrecognized by the government. This decision has been critical for us to retain our autonomy and freedom to innovate.

In recent years, thousands of urban educated families in India have made a conscious choice not to send their children to factory-schooling. My wife and I have been unschooling our 13 year-old daughter Kanku. There is no set syllabus, no tests or exams, no textbooks. Every day, we ask Kanku what she would like to do. She learns with people of all ages in an inter-generational setting at Shikshantar's community center and through working in many spaces around the city in our process of Udaipur as a Learning City. I am happy that she can communicate and connect with people across diverse socio-

[www.shikshantar.org](http://www.shikshantar.org) and [www.swarajuniversity.org](http://www.swarajuniversity.org)

**the following films try to engage the relevance of nai taleem**

<http://shikshantar.org/videos/preeti-mukti-abhivyakti>

<http://shikshantar.org/videos/mera-atma-shikshak-mera-karm>

<http://shikshantar.org/videos/re-imagining-nai-taleem-dialogue-education-helena-norberg-hodge>

<http://shikshantar.org/videos/leap-faith>

**This is about the nai taleem film festival**

<http://shikshantar.org/innovations-shiksha/nai-taalim/nai-taalim-film-festival>

economic backgrounds. She has been helping her friends in an animal shelter, vegetable market, pani-puri shop, beauty parlor, organic farm, community café, amongst many other places in Udaipur. Re-engaging the debate around child labour is an important issue for *nai talim* going forward, as I believe children should have the right to do safe, meaningful work in their families and communities. Kanku's unschooling process has been a major contributor to Vidhi's and my growth as human beings. In all of these various experiments, we have been trying to create learning spaces and processes based on trust, collaboration, mutual care and learning from our mistakes.

In conclusion, I believe more than ever that there is an urgent need for *nai talim* as we face many levels of social and ecological crises in the

world. The god of money has taken centre stage. The global economy is trying to commodify everything: supporting the unparalleled growth of huge corporations (larger and more powerful than many nation-states), land/water/fossil fuel grabbing and SEZs, privatization, subsidies, free trade agreements, urbanization, etc. Even yoga and spirituality has become a commodity. One hundred years ago, Gandhiji advocated *swadeshi* and *satyagraha*. Building on that, we need to reconnect *nai talim* to localization – resisting the global economy and regenerating our local economies, local ecologies and local cultures. This will call for new forms of social, political and economic action as the Market has become more seductive and the State apparatus has become more insensitive and intolerant using more surveillance and more violence towards those who resist.

We need a new politics of hope that goes beyond looking towards big institutions, experts, or good politicians to solve our problems and seeks to more fundamentally change the rules of the game. It is in this larger context that *nai talim* must find its way.

Whatever learning processes we undertake, at the core, I believe we need to urgently reclaim our cultural imaginations, our sense of courage and our power to act.

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