

# Learning for life

Nestled in the Sindhudurg district in the state of Maharashtra is a picturesque Konkani village, Dhamapur, where students acquire life skills outside the confines of the traditional classroom environment. Syamantak, a 'contemporary ashram' or a community of students, and also called the 'University of Life' is founded by Sachin and Meenal Desai, who quit a city life to settle down in their ancestral village.

Inspired by Dr. Srinath Kalbagh, a scientist turned educator, the university is closely aligned to the principles of *nai talim* but follows its own educational approach. All learning in this residential commune is directed by the students, for the students. With spirituality as a base, students benefit by doing things, by using real life activities as a medium. Sachin insists that this is not vocational education.

In an email interview, Sachin answered a few questions about this wonderful school without walls.

What is the essence of *nai talim*? Do these ideas still hold? If so, how and in what context?

Food, shelter, health, and education are basic elements of life. These fundamental necessities have now become consumerist, due to which the natural fabric of our life is disrupted. The present colonial education and consumerist lifestyle is limited to creating technocrats and skilled workforce for industry. Will you call this the ultimate goal of education or the very core purpose of education?

I think we, as a community or as a guardian of new generation, are grooming mechanical humans - robots for the future. Prof Stephen Hawking, one of Britain's pre-eminent scientists, has said that efforts to create thinking machines pose a threat to our very existence. In his interview to the BBC, he warns that artificial intelligence could end mankind. In this trauma and



dilemma of life Gandhi's own experiment on truth becomes more pertinent before we explore the essence of *nai talim*. What provoked him to think of a new approach towards education and livelihood?

I personally think that it was not a very new approach. It was rather re-researching our roots, our early civilization and a bridge between modernity and ancient traditions (knowledge and wisdom).

*"Science is the product of Knowledge discovered through human intellect. So let us use it with alert vigilance (wisdom) only for the sake of the world's welfare (as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm . 91)*

After the colonial rule in India we have disseminated many false notions by totally discarding our traditional wisdom and culture in the name of superstition, poverty, and casteism. After 68 years of colonial independence, we as an independent nation have made things more complex than before. The footprints of ancient wisdom exist even today in remote tribal communities. Undisturbed by crony capitalism in development economies, we can convincingly witness some exceptional eco systems, good governance models, sustainable livelihoods and hands-on approach towards education. Not just in India but also in other indigenous communities across the globe.

**Can we draw strength and purpose from Gandhi's ideas in today's classrooms?**

Many scholars like Gandhiji, Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda whom I consider a divine asset to our country have not only written but practiced what they preached. After independence many such experiments were followed and a few still continue. But if these ideas are limited to skills, and technical innovations, then I will say it is only half-done. To achieve the ultimate goal we have to include the spiritual aspect too which cannot be taught in



classrooms. It can only be practiced and therefore we fail to draw strength and purpose of these divine souls in today's education.

**Tell us something about Syamantak. How was this started? What made you set this up?**

Mrunalini, our three-year old daughter provoked us to re-think education and livelihood. I was compelled to review my school days. Being a rebel in school, I had never understood the ultimate cause of life till I met Dr. Srinath Kalbag, founder of Vigyan Ashram. The spiritual dynamism of my grandfather who is also my spiritual master provoked me to re-research the ultimate truth of my life. In 2007, my wife Meenal and I took a decision to quit city life and migrate to our ancestral village in Konkan. We started a learning centre "School Without Walls" in our 80-year old abundant house. The problems we faced became our syllabus of education. We were joined by two students from Madhya Pradesh and two boys from a local observation home. At University of life, formerly known as "School Without Walls", education may appear to others as vocational education. But what we are aiming here is education using real life activities as a medium. Students at University of Life benefit from the way they learn things - by actually doing them and experiencing them! This is not something they learn and experience in their schools and colleges.

**Are any of your students from the urban community?**

Eventually, our work got recognition and it was spread by word of mouth. In the past eight years there have been students from various backgrounds like tribals, orphans, from the urban community, and also students from various other countries coming for short-term internships. All these students were an amazing diverse learning experience for us too.

**What are the skills that you teach?**

There is no teaching here. University of Life is a real life, sustainable education and livelihood centre of Syamantak, a voluntary organization. Challenges and difficulties, they can be technical, social, legal, financial, etc., become our syllabus for learning. Every day is a new day. Education is not fragmented into theory or practical classes. Infact there are no classes here. Daily routine, projects are self-designed by our student community. Cooking in a traditional kitchen, an indigenous cow farm, *Jaivik Kheti*, natural construction, Ayurveda remedies, stitching and knitting are a few of the sections at the University of Life.

**Is it possible to build a non-violent, cooperative, and sustainable society by making use of this philosophy of basic education?**

Education is like a tripod. Children-community-teachers together create education. It is difficult to have



this holistic approach in restricted school hours limited to classrooms, books, and recreational activities. We therefore believe that school and universities cannot be the only media of education. There are many learning communities in India doing remarkable work in education and sustainable livelihoods. There is a need to bridge these experiments with formal education systems as they could be a great resource and inspiration for schools and colleges who have inconspicuously lost the soul of education.

*“To know physiology, mute lives are mercilessly seized and sacrificed in the name of ‘Noble Pursuit of Knowledge’(as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm. verse 93).*

*Such bloodstained secular science excites demoniacal qualities and invites ruin each day. Way to escape is not visible (as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm. 94).*

*To practise some vow or alms-giving for getting blessed with an offspring is a sign of perverse learning. Then how can the science of ‘A tube baby be superior to it?’ (as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm. 95).*

*If horrible missiles are produced and carefully stocked, how can intrepidity, peace, and tranquility be assured to a commoner? (as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm. 96).*

*By doing space research subtlest knowledge is sought to be acquired but the mind is not sensitive to the neighbour’s weeping (as quoted in Shri. Adaneshwar palm. 97).*

**Nai talim at the rural level may hold promise but in an urban setting? Will not language or medium of instruction be an issue?**

In learning, language is never a barrier. A newborn child has no language (of course there is sign language and language of expression). But the child learns organically all the required skills, art, wordly-language, etc.

Urban settings have many challenges. The design of the lifestyle makes it more complex to accomplish the ultimate goals of education. Few activities can be done to give us some relief and satisfaction. But that will not be an ultimate thing to achieve. Here, I think there is again a need to understand why Gandhi made a revolutionizing transformation in his lifestyle. Before participating in India’s freedom

struggle he had travelled across India to the villages. As a social scientist he discovered the real India in the villages. Also, let’s not forget that all urban settings had been sustainable villages in the past. So definitely, it’s time to transform the urban settings which have created nothing of their own (except jobs). The economy is based on the exploitation of natural resource of villages that lie near the cities. It’s time for our policy makers, politicians, and the people to create self-sustainable urban settings. Education can be a catalyst for this change.

**How can we go beyond nai talim in today’s world?**

We need to bring the right understanding in human civilization. No more – no less. To spread the vision of truth observed by visionary and divine souls is the only relevant thing in today’s world.

**How do you see the current interest in nai talim? Do you think this can be revived?**

*Nai talim* will be incomplete if perceived without Swaraj and Gandhiji’s experiments on truth. One cannot single it out. It should be identified in its totality.