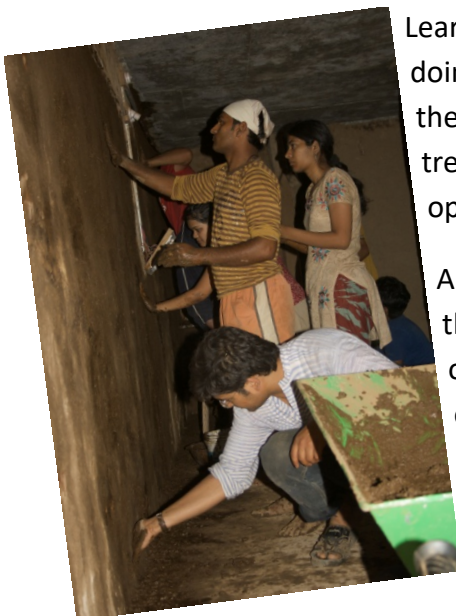


Dear friends, mentors, and advisors,

The last couple of months have been full of excitement, creating of the new and unfolding of the self for all of us at Swaraj University. We are happy to share that the Swaraj University experiment has officially begun. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010 we did a soft launch of this program in Udaipur, Rajasthan with nine energetic, diverse and thoughtful youth who are willing to walk on the path of their making. Learners have joined from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan – the youngest at age 18, the oldest at age 30.

We are right now nearing the end of our first gathering called the *Khoji meet*. We would like to take this opportunity to update you about the major happenings and learnings of our five and a half weeks together.

The focus of our first *Khoji meet* was to facilitate learners in the process of self-awareness, team building, democratic living, understand the process of Self Design Learning and taking concrete steps towards it. We consider ourselves extremely lucky that we have an ideal location in the lap of nature – the *Tapovan Ashram* located amidst the Aravali hills - to engage in this process. The intense early global warming heat has been a challenge but we have been coping well so far.



Learners at Swaraj University spent the first two and a half weeks doing a lot of ground work in understanding themselves, negotiating the art of collective living, understanding local and global issues, trekking into the nearby mountains, as well as exploring the learning opportunities between and around them.

Along with this, learners are also explored their relationship with their learning space. One of our friend's, Shammi, has aptly pointed out that the mainstream educational institutions focus exclusively on their curriculum to the exclusion of learners' relationship with their campus - that they do not have any responsibility and relationship with the food they eat, energy they consume and the waste they generate. Oftentimes this perpetuates a parasitic relationship. So reclaiming our spaces and taking responsibility

for their maintenance and growth is an essential part of our program. All of us took this time to move towards changing our relationship with our learning space by taking part in

cleaning, maintenance, building, cooking, thinking on what we consume and how it impacts our environment as well as giving back to the Ashram by beautifying the space.

Related to this, are the issues of sustainable personal life styles (also a major component of our program) which have spawned a lot of thinking and affected our actions in this meet. Several of our dialogues have centered around the why and how of sustainable life styles – what does it mean to ‘walk the talk’. As part of perspective building and gaining a deeper understanding of these issues we have been watching films and having discussions thereafter, doing short visits to nearby villages, sharing articles, building compost toilet, cooking solar food, and inviting guest speakers to share their perspectives. *Story of Stuff* was one film that has had a lot of impact on the group.



Kishore Saint, a Gandhian thinker, was one of our guest speakers at Swaraj University. He shared his deep concern about development in today’s context. In his talk he traced the history of revolt against development in western countries and provoked us to examine our life and see if we were contributing to destruction or reconstruction. Kishoreji has worked in the field of education with a similar experiment (Friends World College) in the 1970s, so he

beautifully weaved the issues we are facing today to questioning the type of education we need in reclaiming our own lives and building alternatives. His talk indeed left a deep impact as well as invited us to strengthen our commitment to our work. We also had an intense two-day interaction with Sam (South Africa) and Brenno (Brazil) who shared their past year experiences with the Youth Initiative Program (YIP) in Sweden. YIP focuses on social entrepreneurship models. This looks like it can grow into a good partnership for the future as we seem to share many common values.

Our third week saw the introduction of the concept of *Mitra*. Mitras are people who have the gift of reaching out to learners by connecting with them emotionally and helping them to continually introspect. Each learner would invite and be associated with a Mitra during their entire learning process at Swaraj University and would communicate with them on a regular basis. Four well-wishers having the gift to connect to learners on emotional level agreed to come in the role of Mitra. Nitin Paranjape, who is one of the founders of Swaraj University, Nirali Shah from Ahmedabad, Sangeeta Bhagwat from Pune and Vijay Bharatiya from Ahmedabad. It was beautiful to witness how the Mitras clicked with the learners group.

Each Mitra also facilitated a workshop in their areas of expertise. Vijay facilitated a workshop on communication skills especially non-violent ways of communication; Sangeeta, an Emotional Freedom practitioner spent an afternoon on EFT; while Nirali conducted an appreciative inquiry into arts, creativity and nature. The workshops helped the learners to explore different techniques and also created an opportunity to understand the Mitras better.



After spending three weeks at Tapovan Ashram and away from the city, we had the opportunity to participate in an interesting week-long event in Udaipur that was hosted by our friend Edgard from Brazil and the Swapathgami network. We first met Edgard through the Berkana Exchange. The Oasis Game pushed our thinking in various new dimensions: like learning the skills of working with community, knowing how to work on our dreams by making it fun, implementing the social-dialogue

tools. The Oasis game experience was very beautifully designed by mixing fun, co-operative games, dance, dialogue, manual labor, awareness of our surroundings and celebration. We talked about how we could become points of light and inflame others. It was also great to see the connections made between the Swaraj Uni learners and the Swapathgami Walkouts network.

The focus of the last twelve days for the learners has been on setting individual goals and developing personalized learning plans to achieve their goals. A lot of time has been spent on introspection, dialoguing with their peers, identifying what excites them, knowing their gifts and figuring out what path they would like to walk. On the surface this all sounds very easy but it is stirring some of the learners from within and is bringing them face to face with the internal conflict of their beliefs and their actions.

The learners are also spending this time to develop their presentation skills, learning the art of giving and receiving feedback, documenting their learning and preparing for a two-week long *learning journey* to Pune. The learners also completed a two-day mentor challenge in which they spent time with local mentors in Udaipur. Mentorships included working with traditional potter, miniature/pichhwai painter, traditional guni healers, puppeteer, kavaad storyteller, bamboo basket makers, etc. The learners got a good taste of the thrill and challenges of working with a mentor.

We have decided to end our *Khoji meet* in Udaipur by inviting friends of Shikshantar to come and meet us at an open house where learners plan to present their learning process in the form of a play, interactive dialogue sessions, hands on work and sharing their ideas on living with a smaller footprint on this planet. If you are around then please stop by at Shikshantar between 5p.m. – 7p.m. on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, 2010. A second open house is planned with youth groups of Ahmedabad on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. A couple of open houses will take place in Pune during mid-May.

The life on campus has been exciting, challenging the comforts of some, confronting deep personal beliefs that were taken for granted and showing ways of living harmoniously with each other and with nature. It has been a huge learning process for the Stewards Team as well. Each day dealing with diverse learners with such different learning styles, backgrounds and interests, we struggle to slowly find the balance between a truly self-designed learning space vs. bringing in some structured process which helps the learners focus their energies and vision.

We are planning to invite a second group of 12-15 learners to join in mid-July, 2010. We will have a big launching event at that time in Udaipur – it will be great if you can join us for that. June will be spent in giving presentations around north India, while the first group of learners are on their mentorships. We are pretty good so far with class diversity but we only have one female so we need to do a better job of improving our gender diversity. Financially, we have raised enough to support our operations for the first year but we need much more support for scholarships. Several learners have left their jobs to join us. It is difficult for them to raise additional funds from their families. So we are giving them scholarships with the understanding that they will 'pay it forward' to sponsor someone else from their community once they start earning.

We hope this short letter gives you a feel of what is happening at Swaraj Uni. We are extremely pleased by the way this experiment is organically unfolding. We would really like to have your questions, reflections and continued involvement.

With much love and respect,

Reva Dandage, Nitin Paranjape, Manish Jain

p.s. there are lots of photos on Facebook (search for Swaraj University).