

# Social Innovators of Udaipur: Interview with Vidhi Jain

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We are here to have a talk with Mrs. Vidhi Jain, co-founder of the 'Shikshantar Resource Centre for Homeschool/Unschooling, Gap Year, Walkouts and Self-Designed Learners' in Fatehpura, Udaipur, to learn more about this initiative and her vision of education..

## 1. What is Homeschooling and Unschooling? Can you please differentiate between the two?

Nowadays, many parents around India are looking for alternatives to schooling, and there are a lot many valid reasons behind it. Be it the extreme competition, the high pressure and burden of studies, the fact that schooling these days is inducing a distance between the child's world and the parents' world, or maybe they believe that this method of formal schooling isn't nurturing their child's creativity or talents. All in all, they are distancing themselves from this kind of education.

Some families are opting for either 'Homeschooling' or 'Unschooling' as a customized solution to meet their child's unique learning needs. In homeschooling, there's a fixed curriculum that is followed by the child in their homes. Homeschoolers give the normal school exams every year. But the children have a lot more flexibility. There are about as many as 30 lakh families that have opted for homeschooling for their children in the United States. Many of these families are ironically teachers who are very dissatisfied with the current education system.

The other approach, of unschooling, is a bit different from homeschooling. This one largely depends upon the child and their community. In this approach, you give greater freedom to the child to design their own learning program, and nurture him/her to learn the things he/she wants to. Some people view this as a rather radical approach, as here the child is not subjected to some pre-designed set of prescriptions and things are more organic. There is usually more effort to connect the child to activities around their community. Unschooling also refers to the work that parents have to do on themselves in unlearning their conditioned fears and anxieties. Many people that we personally know prefer this approach, but in India at large, both these approaches are growing.

In addition to conscious homeschoolers and unschoolers, there are also a lot of children who walk-out of school or have been labelled as failures. Schools may have given up on them, but we believe that they are powerful learners when given a supportive environment. Plus there are many kids who go to school, but don't really like it. These kids also come to our Resource Centre from time to time.

## 2. How did you come up with the idea of setting up the Shikshantar Learning Resource Centre?

We realized that a lot of people are very critical of the education system but find themselves trapped in it. Both me and my husband decided that we did not want to send our daughter Kanku to school. We really wanted to spend a lot of time learning and living with her. We also wanted to encourage her to interact and learn with people from different generations, not just her own age/peer group.

We also started the Resource center to rethink our urban life-styles, to rediscover our hidden creativity and talents, and to learn many practical skills for sustainable living like farming, cooking, healing, etc.

As we got deeper into this process we opened it as an invitation for other families and learners who showed an interest in taking this brave step in their lives. We did not want all our experiments to be limited to only our lives. Nor did we want to isolate ourselves from society.

Basically, we created the space to support our own unschooling journey as a family, and things grew organically from there. We like to joke that we are the 'guinea pigs' for Shikshantar.

## 3. What has been your experience so far with unschooling your Daughter?

So far, I must say, the experience with unschooling our 13-year old daughter, Kanku, has been very positive. We believe that children should have a lot of time to just freely play. Free play is a powerful source of learning, not a waste of time.

Not being in a school, she does a lot of things that are of a practical nature and interacts with a lot of different kinds of people across different ages. She also travels a lot with us and experiences all kinds of cultures. She is very passionate about many things, and we let her follow these passions. We are supporting her to explore the things she want at the pace that which suits her.



*We have seen that Kanku, our daughter, loves to care for animals and plants. She occasionally volunteers at the animal shelter in Udaipur.*

Kanku also loves art and has been experimenting a lot with different media such as singing, painting, photography and filmmaking. She is also a young entrepreneur and has been sharing and also selling her art with family and friends. These days, Kanku spends quite some time with her vegetable vendor friends and paani puri shop friends and also volunteers and learns with them.

Kanku's dream right now is to become a make-up artist so she also likes to spend time at different beauty parlours. She can spend hours and hours decorating peoples hands and feet with henna.

We are also learning many new things from her. She is helping us to unlearn a lot of the fears, habits and patterns that we have grown up with.

4.

What about her future career opportunities? How will she succeed without a degree?

We strongly believe that degrees and certificates are not true measures of our amazing gifts and skills. We feel that if children get exposed to many different options out there, they will make more conscious choices and develop self-confidence to work in many different settings and with varied groups of people. Most people studying in schools and even graduates these days have not even thought about their career possibilities.

We are encouraging Kanku to be a social entrepreneur and develop her own projects. We believe she learns much more this way. We have helped many young people to set up their little businesses and social projects. We want them to be future job creators rather job beggars.

We also know about 50 alternative universities around the world like Swaraj University that are giving young people without degrees opportunities and learning options. And for people who are not interested in pursuing school, but interested in getting a certificate - there is always the option of National Open School and Indira Gandhi Open University.

We are also in touch with over 300 organizations who are happy to offer placements to young people without degrees and diplomas as part of our "Healing Ourselves from the Diploma Disease" Campaign. They should be ready to share a portfolio of their experiences.

5. What advice do you have for families who are thinking of homeschooling/unschooling their respective children?

Parents should first start to explore their own interests and be open to different kinds of experiments and adventures. This creates a healthy learning atmosphere of mutual learning with the kids. Also, don't be afraid that you are doing it wrong and don't try to copy other families. There is no one ready-made way of homeschooling or unschooling; every family is co-creating their own different methods and processes. That's what makes it beautiful.

We believe that "it takes a village to raise a child" and so the work of parents is to help strengthen local learning ecosystems. We encourage parents to take steps to rediscover and reconnect to their 'treasures' in their local communities, not just in the online world. This is critical to creating a powerful support system for themselves and their children.

The most crucial part of these processes is to make sure you do not turn your home into a school and try not to turn yourselves into 'teachers'. We don't want parents to start labelling their kids into different categories like schools do or constantly comparing them to other children or to abstract learning milestones. We believe that every human-being is gifted and multi-talented. These labels tend to obscure more than they help.

[6. Can you share a couple of stories of people that have been benefitted from this approach?](#)

One perfect example of the same would be Sunny, Manoj and Nirmal. They have been connected with us since the age of 12. They were school-going children living in a basti near our center, when we met them. They used to come to the Resource Center everyday, and gradually, by the time they reached 10th class, they realized that more education was not their thing. By then, Sunny and Manoj decided that they wanted to learn healthy cooking more seriously. We gave them lots of space to experiment and supported them to travel to many different places and learn from many talented chefs. And then they started Millets of Mewar, an endeavour that has proved to be very successful. They don't have any professional degree, yet they are quite happy with their life, and have become capable enough to hire other aspiring people to teach them the art of cooking. Nirmal is a self-taught artist and runs a beautiful art gallery and does an amazing Artisan Walk for tourists and travellers in Udaipur. Most importantly, they are all happy with what they are doing.



Self-taught Chefs Sunny and Manoj left school and started the super-popular Millets of Mewar restaurant.

7. Is this approach relevant in the Indian context?

In my opinion, this approach is highly relevant in the Indian context. More and more people who have degrees are sitting at home unemployed. Most of those employed are either under-employed or not excited about the work that they do. The Homeschooling/Unschooling approach gives the child many more options for the future. We actually have many more learning resources available for supporting children on this path in India - much more, in fact, than in Western countries. So far, we personally know about 1,000 middle class families all around India who have joined us in this movement. And we estimate that there are at least 10,000 such families in urban India. There is a great group in India called

Swashikshan

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[homeschooling.in](http://homeschooling.in)

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8.

Is this viable only for the middle class people? Or for the villagers as well? Can anybody do it?

The Homeschooling/Unschooling approach is not limited to a particular set of people. It can be flexibly adapted by anyone according to their specific context and needs. It is a highly customized approach. We actually believe that the village is a much better learning environment (with more nature and sense of community) and many children there are already doing a lot to design their own learning. It is more a matter of appreciating and re-valuing the real wealth and knowledge that resides in the village.

9.

What is this Year On Gap Year Campaign you have started?

This is for families who are nervous to jump into homeschooling/unschooling. We recommend that they encourage their child to take a 'gap-year' during their schooling so that they can explore the world, travel and learn on their own. We don't call it an year 'off', rather we call it an year 'on' because we believe that the child is gaining many important things. We as an organisation are always happy to support families/young people to plan their Year On gap year. It has been incredible to see whole families taking a gap year together.

10.

What is the Shikshantar Resource Centre all about?

The Shikshantar Resource Center for Homeschooling, Unschooling, Gap Year, Walkouts, Self-Designed Learners was created in 1998 to help us reclaim control over our own learning processes and rebuild our own learning webs. We wish to help people of all generations and backgrounds come and explore many different ways of learning and swaraj living. We believe that self-designed learning is not an individualistic or isolated process. Rather, it happens more deeply and more powerfully when we are part of a community of co-creators. We have tried to nurture such an intergenerational community of collaboration, care and trust in Udaipur. We have tried to create a space where there are no teachers, no exams, no textbooks, no syllabus and no courses. The learning process and goals are designed by the learners themselves.

We encourage more practical, hands-on forms of learning that connects with everyday life. So we do projects in healthy cooking, upcycled products, herbal and natural healing, organic farming, filmmaking, animation, journalism, graffiti art, music, dance, bicycling, etc. in the centre and around Udaipur. We work in the spirit of Gift Culture.

11. *What kind of support do you offer people who are willing to try HomeSchooling or Unschooling?*

The Shikshantar Resource Center offers :

\* **Guidance and Coaching Support:** We support individuals and families who would like to engage in self-designed learning processes to develop their own Personalized Learning Plans, Portfolios and Local Learning Ecosystems (in their hometowns). We offer counseling for parents to unschool themselves so that they can better co-learn with their children. We also help connect learners with various mentors around the country.

\* **Internships in Udaipur's Learning Eco-system:** We connect learners for short and long-term internships with interesting mentors around Udaipur who doing very constructive and creative work. We know amazing Artists, Artisans, Organic Farmers, Chefs, Filmmakers, Designers, Healers, NGOs, Social Entrepreneurs, etc. You can also intern in Shikshantar itself. There are no prior diplomas or degrees required to learn with these people.

\* **Swapathgami Library:** We have a beautiful library with thousands of radical books and films in English and Hindi that can help your explore questions and things that you would want to go deeper into.

\* **Unlearning Workshops, Learning Journeys and Festivals:** Workshops and Learning Journeys are regularly hosted in the Library for skill exchanges, perspective building and building strong relationships. We also host special festivals throughout the year as celebrations of our diversity and local knowledge systems. Events are posted on Facebook page of Shikshantar Andolan. We also host student groups who wish to come for a study tour or learning journey (1 day, 3 days, 5 days) to experience Shikshantar Andolan and Udaipur as a Learning City.

\* **The Incubation Hive:** Got an amazing idea for starting up a project or social enterprise in Udaipur? We can support you with refining the idea, networking, skill development opportunities, mentoring, developing and launching a prototype and a crowd-funding campaign. We are supporting many inspiring projects and campaigns as part of the Hacking the Education System Campaign and the Udaipur Localization Fellowship with kids, youths and adults.

\* **Families Learning Together Gatherings:** We have help organize these between gatherings with 8-12 families at a time in Udaipur, Panchgani, Goa, Indore, Delhi. We can support you in organizing a special gathering in your community.

\* **Vimukt Shiksha Publishing House and Community Dialogues:** We have published over 20 books and magazines, and hundreds of videos in English, Mewari, Hindi on decolonizing our lives and reclaiming our own learning from institutions. We have also developed the Nai Taleem Film Festival for screening in homes and communities. All materials are copyleft and available on our website is <

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

>. Share your experiences of SDL with us.

\* **Gift Culture Guest House:** Come stay with us to experience Udaipur as a Learning City for a few days in our simple but clean guest- house. The guest house runs on a gift culture basis - pay what you can from your heart.

To learn more about the Shikshantar Resource Center, contact Vidhi Jain <[vidhi@swaraj.org](mailto:vidhi@swaraj.org)> or drop by and meet us at 21 Fatehpura, Udaipur, Rajasthan 313004. Tel. 91-294-245-1303.

Listen to Vidhi Jain's TEDx talk

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