Self designed learning at Swaraj University

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A space to know oneself. A space to grow. A space to experiment.

A space to do what YOU are really passionate about. A space to stumble and fall, make mistakes. A space to make friends.

A space to understand diversity, community and democracy. A space to question, and be questioned.

A space to DO SOMETHING, for the environment, for society, for one’s community.

The Purpose:

It’s been four years since we at Swaraj University took our first baby steps together. And as this University celebrates its third anniversary, we look back at the excitement, co-creation, friendship, deep questioning, emotional healing, unfolding of self, intense dialogues, discoveries, experiments, mistakes and learning, and much, much more that has been part of the initial years of Swaraj University.

Taking inspiration from India’s rich ‘guru-shishya’ tradition, Mahatma Gandhi’s naitaleem, Rabindranath Tagore’s Shantiniketan Ashram, and Rancho’s 3 Idiots, Swaraj started in April 2010, as a supportive and nurturing space for young people to self-design their learning process to become green entrepreneurs. Swaraj University is unique because each learner gets the opportunity to develop her own personalized learning program based on her own dreams. Swaraj gives freedom to each student to decide what they want to learn, how they want to learn, and from whom they want to learn. Reva Dandage, co-founder of this university, states, “Swaraj is India’s first university dedicated to strengthening our local cultures, local economies and local ecologies. Sustainability, social justice and holistic, healthy living are the core principles of our vision. Within this larger context, we are keen to support young people in putting their dreams into action and developing eco-friendly businesses that make a difference for the world.”

The People:

Today, we stand as a core community of over sixty enthusiastic and diverse khojis (seekers), and six facilitators with international experience who have motivated and guided the khojis in their journeys of learning. Mentoring, supporting and holding this core together is a larger, much wider community of people who believe in Swaraj and our principles – friends, family members, faculty mentors, support organizations and networks spread over India and the world.

Within the batches, there is a strong diversity – of age, language, religion, even ideologies and beliefs. The khojis have come from Rajasthan, Gujarat, M.P., Maharashtra, U.P., Delhi, Chennai, Orissa and Karnataka, from urban and rural settings. There is no prior degree or diploma required to join; the only requirements are knowledge of Hindi and a commitment to do something good for society and the environment. The youngest of the group is 17 years old and the oldest 30 years old. Says co-founder Nitin Paranjape, “We believe that everyone can learn and do something well in the world – unlike mainstream education which creates a lot of failures. They just need a chance to identify their talents, find their inner passions and be in a community of support.”

Some fellow khojis:

Anant Singh, an 18 year old boy from Mysore who has finished his 12th Std, is running an organic farm and plans to work on eco homes in cities, with rooftop farming, toilets that use less water and solar lighting and heating. His big dream is to lead a ‘sensible’ ecologically positive lifestyle in a rural-based self-sustaining community in tune with nature, not consumerist and waste-generating. He says, “The networks and connections that I have formed with
Harshita Wadhya, a young woman from the historic city of Varanasi, U.P., did her graduation from Delhi University and is now exploring her interest in alternative healing. Her focus is on energy work/pranic healing, love and forgiveness and its role in healing, as well as past-life regression and dancing. She says that, “After joining Swaraj University, I have started believing in my dreams and values again. I am able to learn from my mistakes and have regained my faith in humanity. I really have enjoyed spending time with my mentor.”

Gyan Shahane, a 20 year-old from Nasik, Maharashtra, is interested in filmmaking, particularly in the drama/fiction category to bring about positive change in the society at large. He has been working closely with Ekta Parishad and making films about the struggle of land for the landless. His other interests are writing, reading, theatre and photography. He says that, “The love and acceptance for the person I am that I got after joining Swaraj University gives me the strength and courage to do what I want to do and walk on the path I have chosen for myself.”

The diversity of the first three batches has made for intense discussions and challenging situations at times. But, over the years, we have also witnessed the formation of strong bonds of friendship and trust amongst the group that transcend the barriers of age, class and language. Fitting with the vision, the campus has been set up at an ideal location in the lap of nature – Tapovan Ashram, an organic farm and nursery 30 km. away from Udaipur city, located amidst the Aravalli hills. We have developed a small library, a multimedia lab, residential facilities and a community kitchen there.

According to co-founder Reva Dandage, “The mainstream education institutions focus exclusively on their curriculum to the exclusion of learners’ relationship with their environment – that they do not have any responsibility and relationship with the food they eat, the energy they consume or the waste they generate.” Hence, all the khojis and faculty on campus take part in the designing, developing and maintaining of community spaces like the kitchen, library, dorms, outdoor classrooms, organic farm and shouldering community responsibilities like cooking, cleaning and thinking of what we consume and how it impacts our environment. “Life on the campus has been exciting, challenging the comforts of some, confronting the deep personal issues of others, while we explore ways of living harmoniously with each other and with nature,” says Sakhi, one of the khojis from Nashik.

The Process:

The course is conducted in Hindi, while keeping in mind each individual's need for expression in his/her native language. The program believes in practical learning by doing. The program is divided into Khoji Meets (one month every quarter during the first year), at the university’s campus and Mentorship Periods of 2-3 months anywhere in the country. The khojis spend the Khoji Meets practicing self-awareness, team-work, unlearning and perspective deepening. Ecological sustainability, healthy living, social justice and self-designed learning are the principles around which Swaraj University’s program has been designed. The khojis watch movies, research topics and organize discussions thereafter, visit nearby villages, share articles and other resources, do hands-on projects such as building compost toilets, eco-building and cooking solar food, interact with international students from other countries and invite resource persons to share their views.

During the Meets, khojis also hone their documentation and presentation skills, design portfolios and they give and take feedback for their learning and growth. Through exercises and sessions organized by the facilitators, khojis identify their individual learning goals, design plans to achieve them, identify skills that need to be built, re-define their dreams and goals and chart out their mentorship periods.

The program believes that the world is our classroom. During the mentorship period, the khojis learn skills and practical wisdom from faculty-mentors in fields they want to work in. Swaraj mentors have expertise in fields ranging from organic farming, naturopathy and healing, community radio to filmmaking, women’s rights to working with street children, zero waste crafts to healthy cooking, sustainable design to appropriate renewable technologies. We have over 150 ustaad-mentors all over the country as our faculty and the list is growing.

It is important to note that Swaraj University does not give out any degrees or certificates. It is a peoples’ university, accredited by the people. According to Reva Dandage, “We want students to have real skills and knowledge to take up real projects in their communities – not just lifeless pieces of paper. Over the course of the 2 years, khojis will develop their own portfolios of practical experience and references. At the end of 2 years, they will each have the full confidence and vision to start their own right livelihood projects.”
As khojis or seekers, it has been an exciting journey of discovery and experimentation for all of us. We have learnt through various experiences such as visiting a prison, organising a fair in the neighbouring village, setting up a food stall made from local grains in a community, silent trekking in the mountains, working with local artisans like potters, puppeteers, etc., interviewing tribal nomads who walk miles with their goats, interacting with youth from foreign countries, tracing the pugmarks of a leopard, attending international conferences amongst many others.

“One of the highlights of the year was our participation in an amazing week-long, hands-on, service learning, community building exercise called the Oasis Game in Shivaji Nagar in Udaipur that was conducted by our friend Edgard from Brazil. It pushed our thinking and learning in various dimensions such as learning the skills of working within a community, knowing how to work for our dreams by making it fun and implementing the social-dialogue tools. For many of us, it ignited a new vision and spirit of sewa.”

“Travelling is a great way to learn. We lay a lot of stress on Learning Journeys which are extremely enriching and energizing in the first year. Last year, we went to Pune and Ahmedabad. We did a very unique and inspiring Cycle Yatra, a journey into villages without money, cell phones, food or any other amenities. During the Cycle Yatra, we pushed our own physical and comfort limits, we questioned our relationship with money and the broader question of dependency, ‘progress, ‘security’ and ‘development’!”

So far the first three years of Swaraj University has witnessed many exciting innovations in education. It is slowly but surely developing into a new university for the needs and opportunities of supporting localization in the 21st century. Several khojis have already received job offers after their first year. Many are in the process of setting up their own community businesses. Most importantly, we have seen deep growth and transformative changes in the khojis themselves.

See the Swaraj University website, facebook page.

See another article about Swaraj University in The Hindu newspaper, January 5, 2014 : A New School of Thought