

Why parents are choosing to unschool their children

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Tired of the conformist educational code in the country, some parents are now taking the path less travelled and choosing to homeschool and even unschool their children.



Aprajita Negi with her eight-year-old son Aarav.

For five years, Pune-based Rayn Samson did little apart from playing video games. Today, the 21-year-old, who didn't attend school for even one day and instead was 'unschooled', has completed his IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) and is appearing for his A Levels (IGCSE is graded from A to G, with U stated as 'Ungraded') this year—he aspires to become an educator. Not just that, Rayn, who is passionate about football and gymming, is also working with ThinQ—a collective that provides curriculum support to schools to foster critical thinking abilities—where he is part of the teaching team.

In a country like India, which is obsessed with formal education and degrees and certificates, the thought of a child not going to school and instead playing video games at home is one that will strike horror in many a parents' heart. But there are a few parents now who, tired of the conformist educational code and practices prevalent in the country, are taking the path less travelled and choosing to homeschool (wherein children follow their own unique self-directed learning paths) and even unschool (an educational method and philosophy that advocates learner-chosen activities as a primary means for learning) their children.

Rayn's parents John and Urmila Samson are among them. The husband and wife, who have three children—26-year-old daughter Sahya, Rayn and 18-year-old son Niom—didn't send any of them to a traditional school, choosing instead the offbeaten path of unschooling for all three. On being asked why they did so, 56-year-old homemaker Urmila says she felt strongly that school was not a healthy place to spend one's childhood in. According to her, sitting quietly, being obedient, listening to someone else are not things that children should be doing. Instead, they should play, move and make their own path each day.

Today, her daughter Sahya, who pursued a four-year course in eurythmy (an expressive movement art) from Peredur Eurythmy institute in the UK from 2011-15, is a freelance teacher of the subject. And her youngest son Niom recently finished a two-year learning programme for youth from Udaipur's Swaraj University (the focus of the programme is on self-designed learning, green entrepreneurship and social justice). Niom's project at the university focused on the use of creative games for problem-solving.

But what about a child's social life if he or she doesn't go to school? For Niom, it was easier because whom he befriended wasn't restricted by age, class or gender. Take, for instance, his steadfast friendship with their 70-year-old house cook Khala. "One of my best friends since early childhood is Bismillah Shaikh whom we affectionately call Khala," he says. "I have learnt a lot from her over the years. I admire her fearlessness. We talk about many issues... religion, intelligence, childhood, freedom, arranged marriage and so on."

Interestingly, for Urmila, the main challenge in unschooling her children was not so much her own conditioning, but the conditioning of other people. "I dealt with it by living a largely non-social, isolated life from 1992 till around 2009. We lived in a large semi-joint family, so that helped," she says.

Alternative schooling

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore was a big critic of the country's traditional idea of education and labelled schools of his times as 'prisons'. In stories like Parrot's Training (1924), he mocked colonial education, which put the natural impulses of a learner under lock and key, and tried to educate him through harsh discipline. The satire talked about how traditional education is mainly focused on textbooks and authoritarian figures, completely neglecting the child's needs in the process. Tagore also blamed schools for giving birth to robots with no sense of individuality.

In his book Deschooling Society (1971), Croatian-Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich, too, speaks about what ails conventional schools. "Schools have failed our individual needs, supporting false and misleading notions of progress and development fostered by the belief that ever increasing production, consumption and profit are proper yardsticks for measuring the quality of human life. Our universities have become recruiting centres for the personnel of consumer society, certifying citizens for service, while at the same time disposing of those adjudged unfit for the competitive rat race," he writes.

Life learning

Chennai-based entrepreneur Jaya Periyar (name changed on request) has been homeschooling her 13-year-old son Roshan (name changed on request) since he was four-and-a-half years old. She calls it “life learning”. Explaining why she decided to homeschool her son, 48-year-old Periyar says that he never took to the rigid school structure and she, too, felt that it was controlling his life. However, she does admit to finding it challenging when her son left school and watched TV for three straight months. Eventually, though, she let go of the need to control and her son, too, outgrew the medium.

Periyar can also take heart from the many success stories of homeschooled kids making it big. Take, for instance, 17-year-old Malvika Joshi. In 2016, the Mumbai-based student got admission in the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for a degree programme in science. Malvika was homeschooled since 2012 by her mother Supriya Joshi, who believed that her daughter was not learning anything in school and so decided to teach her at home herself. Supriya, who used to work with an NGO earlier, is a co-founder of Swashikshan—Indian Association of Home Schoolers, a non-profit initiative whose members include all Indian homeschoolers. Founded in July 2012, it has around 1,000 homeschooling parents as members today.

Then there is 20-year-old Angad Daryani from Mumbai who is currently pursuing engineering from Atlanta’s Georgia Institute of Technology. Daryani—who in 2013 created an e-book reader for blind people called Virtual Braille, which converts written text to Braille—attended a traditional school from kindergarten till class VIII, but soon realised that he was not learning anything. Plus, the system was stopping him from pursuing his passion. “I’ve been building things since I was small and that’s a passion that the school was preventing me from pursuing,” he says, adding, “Even though I was doing well academically, I realised that I didn’t understand what I was doing... my math fundamentals were terrible. I didn’t know how to calculate LCM (least common multiple), didn’t know how fractions worked, would find decimal numbers daunting and made sign errors in linear equations.”

So, in 2012, Daryani bid school goodbye in the ninth grade and then was homeschooled for two years by his tuition teacher Vinit Ajgaonkar. “Vinit sir helped me find my academic ground again—something that helped me cope with harder mathematical and scientific tasks later,” says Daryani, who while being homeschooled also got in touch with Ramesh Raskar, an associate professor at MIT Media Lab, and requested to work with him. Raskar then invited him to be part of a workshop his team was conducting at BITS Hyderabad. After that, Angad continued collaborating with the MIT.

While Daryani was enjoying what he was doing, his parents and tutor became concerned about his lack of discipline. Also, he had become irregular with academics because he found his work with MIT far more interesting. “It was affecting my retention of content and my tutor communicated that to my parents... Hence, to gain the discipline and academic work ethics, I went back to school for grades XI and XII,” says Daryani.

Another drawback of being homeschooled was that he wasn’t spending time with people his age. “There’s always a tradeoff. It was an unconventional path and often the unconventional path is a lonely one. I had also started working with MIT, so most of my friends were in the age range of 20-30 years, while I was just 13. Even though having older friends helped me grow and learn new things, it’s not something I would recommend,” he says.

One memory of his homeschooling days, however, that he will always hold dear is when he met former president APJ Abdul Kalam. “In October 2013, I was presenting (an MIT team project) to APJ Abdul Kalam and I was introduced as the kid who had dropped out. Before looking at the project, he told me just one thing: ‘I’m proud that you’re not in school. Don’t ever go back,’” reminisces Daryani.

Looking ahead

In 1998, Harvard-educated learning activist Manish Jain co-founded [Shikshantar](#), an education movement that aims to eradicate age-old notions of mass schooling in society. Udaipur-based Jain, who also helped start Udaipur’s Swaraj University as part of Shikshantar, feels that degrees are the tools to reinforce hierarchy in society, which is worse than the caste system. Shikshantar was designed as a “space where people who were aware of deep critiques of factory-schooling could come together and engage in creative ways to dismantle the educational monopoly and to regenerate diverse learning spaces and knowledge systems,” the 50-year-old says. At Shikshantar, alternative education is synonymous with learning from life instead of textbooks, exams and classrooms. Today, Shikshantar is involved in many movements, projects and lifestyle explorations such as slow food, upcycling, organic farming, natural dyeing, eco-architecture, etc.

In 2015, Jain also helped start [Creativity Adda](#), an unschooling project in a low-income government school in north Delhi to prove that the idea is possible across economic and social hierarchies. “We wanted to challenge NGOs and social change agents... we can’t just throw educational crumbs of the old system to the poor,” he says.

Not just that, to ensure that the homeschooled get equal opportunity access, Shikshantar (under its ‘Healing the Diploma Disease’ campaign) is in talks with over 500 companies and organisations willing to give people an opportunity to work with them after judging their portfolios, and not degrees—a clear indication of a major change in the offing.

At their own pace

Pune-based Sanjyot Haridkar, a remedial educator, counsellor and psychologist, sent her two sons Ram and Kabir for one year to school. The boys (who are 13 and 12 years old today), however, resented the place. “We realised that each child grows at his/her own pace and we don’t need to streamline them. My kids also reacted quite strongly to the teaching method there... they weren’t happy with the drill... they were forced to dance onstage in costumes,” says 40-year-old Haridkar, adding that it made her happy to know that her sons were learning to take a stand at a young age, and, hence, decided to homeschool them.

From then till 2016, she taught her two sons at home, using NCERT books, activity books, worksheets, etc, as teaching tools. What made a difference, she says, is that she went ahead according to the boys’ pace. Her elder son Ram, for instance, would finish two English books back to back, but would take a lot of time with math, and she allowed him that space.

In 2016, however, Haridkar and her husband decided to put them in a traditional school setup as they thought it was necessary for their kids to experience that life too. And so, the boys went to school for the first time in the sixth and seventh grades, respectively.

Interestingly, during admissions, the school principal asked Haridkar to put her kids in a lower grade, but she put her foot down, opting for age-appropriate grades for Ram and Kabir confident that they wouldn’t have a problem, and today, she is happy with their academic performance.

When it comes to homeschooled children, however, the one issue that always crops up is discipline, with critics arguing that the two don’t go hand-in-hand. But

Haridkar's sons shatter that myth too. Passionate about football, Kabir, for instance, gets up every morning before 5 to go for training. There are even times when he wakes his mother in the morning.

As far as the future goes, the Haridkars are contemplating going back to homeschooling to let the boys focus on sports, but both Ram and Kabir are now attached to their school friends and are, hence, stuck in a dilemma.

Going with the flow

For Delhi-based Aprajita Negi, mother of eight-year-old Aarav, homeschooling wasn't a natural choice. Negi, who has a PhD in biomedical science, was working in the national capital, but in 2014, had to quit and shift to Chennai because of her husband's job. "Aarav was in kindergarten then and there was lots of homework," says Negi, who decided to take a sabbatical from work to focus on her son. The break, however, also made her realise that life can be explored in different ways, especially where her son's education was concerned. "My husband and I both thought it would be better to give him a break," says the 36-year-old.

She researched the Montessori educational method and was greatly influenced by the philosophy. For Negi, it worked because there was no fixed syllabus. Next, she located a Montessori resource centre near their place and found it to be suitable. But then, her husband was transferred again and they had to move back to Delhi.

Once in Delhi, Negi went on to pursue a Montessori teaching diploma by distance learning from an institute in Canada. Post that, she started homeschooling her son. When asked if she uses tools like books and the internet to teach Aarav, Negi says, "No books, no internet. We don't divide things under subjects. These days, we are studying Asia... also the Arabian Desert... and, believe it or not, from there somehow the Israel-Arab conflict came up and we discussed that too," says Negi, who prefers drawing a map for Aarav instead of directing him to the exact location on a readymade one.

As far as the learning process goes, they start conversing about something casually and then go in-depth into it naturally. They were discussing pollution in October, for instance, and the topic of crop-burning came up. From there, they went on to talk about the policies of the government. "We are living in the era of free internet... you can learn anything, everything is available... so I don't think anyone can accept or reject you based on knowledge. If Aarav does something mainstream and he has to go to school for it, the school would have to accept him without a marksheet," says Negi, who doesn't have any concrete future plans for Aarav. "At this age, he wants to be an air force pilot, so I have told him the ways in which he can go about it. Whatever he will do, we will be satisfied with it," she says.

Freestyle learning

In 2012, Delhi-based graphic designer Priyanka Sahota, mother of eight-year-old Kabir, was selecting school application forms for her then three-year-old son when she realised that he was too young for such a huge setup and wouldn't get the care and one-on-one attention like at home. So she decided to wait for a year before sending him to school. During that time, she came across the idea of homeschooling while browsing blogs of people in the US and Australia, and also learnt about the Waldorf and Montessori educational methods. "I liked that they didn't work on the surface level, but on a deeper one," the 37-year-old says.

She found two schools in Delhi, which followed the Waldorf system and admitted Kabir in one of these for kindergarten in 2013. Dissatisfied, however, she later got him out and went on to explore the Montessori way, but that didn't work for her as well. "I realised that Kabir is not someone who can be nurtured in a Montessori setup. He is more of a freestyle learner," she says. "As a caregiver and mother, I realised that Montessori is left-brain-oriented and focuses too much on technicalities. I preferred Waldorf because it's focused on feelings. But I wanted him to get his own perspective on things instead of reality being imposed on him," she adds.

So Sahota attended a few workshops about homeschooling and started it at home with Kabir in 2015 in a full-fledged manner. "I don't want him to be a part of any race," says Sahota, who was supported by her husband in her decision. In homeschooling, she says, "there is no particular syllabus to follow and that's where the freedom comes from. Whatever Kabir learns, he learns it by living. Take geography, for example. We go for walks and travel, and that's how he learns it. Plus, Kabir is a Lego addict and most concepts that he has learned, he has learned from that."

Interestingly, Kabir, who is passionate about gun-making, pirates and gangsters, learnt to make a play gun from YouTube. The Sahotas have a small carpentry workshop on the ground floor of their house and Kabir saw carpenters working there, getting the idea of making his gun in the same way, his mother reveals.

Critics, however, argue that homeschooling curbs a child's social life. Sahota, however, thinks it doesn't. Instead, she believes that, for a child, interacting with people of all ages is important. "Kabir is outspoken and, today, he can talk freely with everyone, including old ladies and rickshaw-vallahs," she says, adding that they don't worry about what shape Kabir's career will take in the future. "Maybe he will become a farmer, maybe an astronaut... the choice will be entirely his. I don't want him to take a job because of social status or to pay off education loans," she asserts.

Back to the roots

As a child, Udaipur-based learning activist Vidhi Jain went to many different schools because of her father's transferable job. The constant moving around made her question the relevance of the conventional educational system in the country. She also regretted the fact that she couldn't spend enough time with her grandparents or with nature due to the strict timings of school.

In the early 90s, when she went to Delhi University to graduate in sociology, she started feeling even more disconnected, questioning the reason behind getting a degree. Eventually, she started travelling to rural areas, learning about their cultures and traditions, and realised that all that knowledge is dying. Life changed in 1997 when she got married to learning activist Manish Jain and moved to Udaipur. A year later, they founded Shikshantar. The turning point, however, came in 2002 when her daughter was born. "After my daughter Kanku was born, my real education started—how to bring up a healthy child in this world," the 46-year-old says. Kanku, who is 16 years' old today, has been brought up under the Shikshantar philosophy.

The Jains ensured that the whole city of Udaipur became a learning ecosystem for Kanku. Instead of going to school when she was younger, Kanku would volunteer at animal shelters and spend time at art galleries and with artists. She also spent quality time with her grandparents and learnt cooking. "She would also spend time in the neighbourhood with the paanipuriwala," says Jain, who disapproves of the claustrophobic nature of a classroom and children only mixing with kids their age. "It takes a village to raise a child," says Jain, who believes in "intergenerational learning", which can only happen when different age groups come

together and learn from each other.

Kanku, who is passionate about art, music and painting, is a budding artist herself and started selling her artwork from a very young age. As far as the future is concerned, the teenager is still figuring out what she wants to do. "Four or five years ago, she wanted to be a makeup artist, so she started spending time at the local beauty parlour," says Jain, who is not anxious about Kanku's future. The biggest "unlearning" in unschooling, she says, is to let go of your worries about the future.

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Read Robindranath Tagore's [The Parrot's Training](#)