

School Without Walls, Syamantak, Sindhudurg, Maharashtra

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I was doing well at Baskin Robbins, the world's leading U.S.-based ice cream company. Lucrative offers to work abroad were on the horizon, and I was looking forward to an appropriate break. Then, my college friend approached me with an innovative business idea around multimedia computers and educational software. They would make complex lessons simple and enjoyable. Being a back-bencher in school, I was fascinated by this concept. I decided to quit my job. We operated our business from a posh Mumbai locality and had one of the best schools in the city as our client. During this period my grandfather insisted I meet Dr. Kalbag, a scientist turned educationist, and see his experiments with [Vigyan Ashram](#). I was not keen to travel all the way to the remote village of Pabal to visit an unfamiliar person. When I finally met Dr. Kalbag, it was hard to believe that someone would migrate from a posh bungalow in Juhu to a barren land in a village. I never knew this was going to be a turning point in my life. I was inspired by Dr. Kalbag's vision so I started concentrating more on schools in remote areas. I learned a lot during my travels in the tribal areas. Having escaped 'education' and 'development,' they are still original and authentic, holding on to their culture and world-view, which has sustained them for centuries. Around the same time, I met Minal, my wife. We shared common thinking and values, and she joined me in the business. Overall business was flourishing, however, it was an extremely frustrating experience. We found ourselves dealing with money-hungry school managers and stubborn teachers who didn't have the self-determination to transform themselves. We were continually negotiating with our business ethics. What was the value of this build-a-business-at-any-cost kind of life? Finally, Minal and I decided to quit. We were convinced that despite of all the glitter, the five-star hotels, malls, consumerist hospitals and schools, the culture of India is still in rural areas. In days of yore, excellent architects, super human minds, amazing space walkers, all lived in villages and forests. None of the great of that time had to leave and go to foreign countries or cities for 'higher education'. If our soul resides in the soil, then our education ought to be related to Mother Earth. We decided to migrate to our ancestral village in the region of Konkan. My great-grandfather migrated from this village to Kolhapur town to join Rajaram College as professor of mathematics. Since then our house was lying idle. The move was a very 'irrational' decision. While not absolutely clear about what we were going to do, Minal and I read more on K.J. Baby's Kanavu non-formal school and Bunker Roy's Barefoot College, as well as J. Krishnamurthi's and Gandhi's ideas on education. We converted our 80-year old abandoned ancestral house into a school that would provide real education. Instead of lectures in closed classrooms, we would help children learn through observation, by making mistakes and experiencing responsibility. Two youth from a local orphanage initially joined us for this experiment.



'School without Walls' came together by questioning, experimenting and exploring. Our daily life problems became our curriculum to learn. It slowly developed into a school for the students, of the students and by the students. Today, our daughter, Mrunalini, is no longer going to school. She is grooming herself wonderfully in this natural learning system. To nurture the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-reliance among ourselves and our ex-students, the concept of 'Incubation - A Resource Center' has emerged. We are producing vermi-wash/vermi-compost on an industrial scale. We are now planning to start a bakery unit, organic fast food center, and soil brick production. "School Without Walls", may appear to others as vocational education, but is not. What we are aiming at is not vocational education, but education using real life activities as a medium. Our emphasis is on learning while doing in real life. We believe that working with your hands is what teaches you best. Our education is related to our Mother Earth and we believe that nobody should be forced to leave his village for bread, butter or education. Over the years, I have learnt that money is not an end in itself. You should try to do what you like best of all. Minal and I feel content these days. Finally, what our conscience tells us, and what we actually do in our daily lives, is converging.

Website:

<http://syamantak.cfsites.org/>

[Reprinted from:](#) Swapathgami Magazine

Original Title:

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