

## **Learning for everyone**

Written specially for Vikalp Sangam website, by **Desneige Hallbert**

Syamantak's "School without walls" is a center for experiential learning at Dhamapur village in Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra, India. Believing that education should be in the hands of the students, it is not a vocational school, but a life education school where real life situations are used as a medium for learning. For example, it is where reading, writing, and maths are infused with ecology, agriculture, architecture. This style of learning also engages and enlists the local community to be teachers, thus hoping to ensure the passing of local knowledge. Each child's interest is encouraged to blossom and hands-on learning is a must.

So why was I there? Well, Syamantak isn't only a school for children and adolescents, but for anyone interested in learning about sustainable living and rural life. In addition to inviting local community members to participate throughout their school year, Syamantak hosts multiple events that also encourage city folk and foreigners (like myself) to be part of this life learning process. So far I've attended two of their events. The first was NaiTalim "a journey into the world of rural communities" where mostly people from cities like Pune, Bangalore, and Dehli, came to spend five days in Vengurla, learning from rural communities on the Konkan coast. Presentations by a potter and a weaver, children musicians (from the Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya school: <http://www.ksv.org.in/>), members of the Hijra community, spiritual leaders, organic farmers and even the participants themselves inspired and enthralled not only adults but the children who came with them as well. Some participants didn't have families and had just come on their own—but all were made to feel like family. It was the most inclusive event I've ever been to. At first I was disgruntled by the lack of schedule but then I realized that it was about exploration and one could gravitate towards one of the presentations, to the beach, to the local fishing village, wherever your curiosity led you. This was very different from any workshop I'd ever attended, and by the end of it...I loved it. I too became a teacher. I taught swimming to the child musicians who had, the morning before, taught me the classical scale and allowed me to play the harmonium. The idea behind this event is to then pass on the torch to previous year participants to then host another NaiTalim in another part of India. Not sure where next years' will be but readers be on the look out! Now after attending this event I made sure I attended their first ever Harvest of Konkan Festival which happened in mid-May. Like NaiTalim, this too is an event that will be sure to continue year after year and quite possibly at least twice a year! The next one will most likely be in September.

The Harvest of Konkan Festival was held at the Syamantak campus in Dhamapur. This gave me a chance to see their actual school and grounds and meet the students. I had no idea I'd then be welcomed as part of the family too! I became a student and a teacher, the rolls constantly flipping throughout my entire week there. Again, like NaiTalim, there was no set schedule and yet I accomplished so much each day. And despite the dripping heat, there was plenty of time for rest and yet also amazing activity from learning how to harvest cashews and make cashew cheese, to seeing how a loom is strung (its takes six people!), setting up a tent and making a cow dung floor for it, watching local bamboo artists make baskets, visiting the 90-year-old community archivist (he's been collecting and safe-keeping local newspapers for over 40 years!) taking a tour of the surrounding organic farms, painting with red clay and dung, making maps...and so much more. Even now while writing I could list five more projects but alas, all I will say is, I got to do exactly what I was interested in and somehow in the short amount of time I was there, I did it all, and in the most amazing company of children (who were also my teachers of course!). Something else that struck me about the

kids (besides their being great teachers despite a language barrier) was that after a hectic day of building and learning, the kids spent the time before dinner reading or writing, unafraid to ask for help. Some wanted to learn English. No teacher told them they should do it, they did it on their own. In the evening, after a scrumptious meal shared by all, we'd all sit, sometimes talk or sometimes watch a documentary or movie...every day was a lovely day filled with exploration and inspiration.

The campus itself is a playground—flexible and resilient— constantly changing to fit the needs of the students. Gardens grow food and teach children about medicinal plants and square footage. Other gardens soak up the leftover water from the kitchen drain—a surprise papaya grows there too. The backyard floods each summer monsoon, so the space constantly is adapting to the seasons and needs of the school. At the moment it's where the Harvest tent is and where I taught a lesson on observing nature and site mapping. A great outdoor classroom, no walls—after all, it is a school without walls.

7 years old now, Syamantak, brings children from all walks of life and ages together to learn. Operating on a gift culture system, each child costs about 25,000 Rupees/yr. Their's is a sustainable lifestyle with fully functioning vermi-compost and bio-gas production and a zero-waste policy. They use solar energy and water harvesting techniques. All the children know how to take care of these processes and why they are important. The diet is organic and the kitchen is run by one of the older students who understands the workings of the kitchen like the back of his hand. His aptitude and interest is food so he's learned to grow it, cook it, supply and buy, what to do with the leftovers, and teach all that he knows (cashew cheese, bread, and hibiscus syrup—the knowledge of how to make it has been shared!). Oh and with another older student, whose interest is more geared towards engineering, I helped install a net to catch coconuts!

When strangers feel like family, when a school feels like a cozy home, when learning feels like everyday fun and work like peaceful meditation, there will be peace on earth. Peace between different cultures and between people and nature...Syamantak is on the right track.

Except nos. 1, 3, 5, separately indicated, all other pictures are by the author.



Figure 1 Stringing a loom (photo by Lucy Baranko)



Figure 2 Cashew harvest!



Figure 3 Mapping the campus (photo by Lucy Baranko)



Figure 7 Visiting the local bamboo artist



Figure 8 Painting with the local red soil and dung