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We have everything we need: Reclaiming control of education

by Beverly Bell



Photo by Manish Jain

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 8 of 12

Shilpa Jain is a 'learning activist' with Shikshantar, one of many initiatives around the world that are reclaiming culture, identity and language from often stultifying colonial-legacy education. Shilpa is part of a movement to generate new ways to educate children, youth, and adults, and to share knowledge that reflects community wisdom and values. What's at stake is nothing less than who controls information and culture, and what values are propagated in society.

By Shilpa Jain

Udaipur, India and Oakland, Calif. -- At Shikshantar, we're trying to support the shift from a money-dominant globalized culture to a more small-scale, relationship-focused culture. We want to encourage people to rethink education and development. Our philosophy springs from the Gandhian principle of *Swaraj*

, which refers to self-rule. It's the links among all beings and the responsibility to take care of one another.

My grandmother never went to school, she never knew how to read or write, and she was such a wise and brilliant woman. She was incredibly creative, could come up with songs and dances and games right on the spot. She had tons of practical knowledge on herbal remedies and healing practices, and she was the most environmentally conscious person I know. Nothing ever went to waste; she would always make something out of anything. Because of her, I started asking about and looking for more of that kind of knowledge.

My activism has always been defined by what's doable rather than what are we fighting against. What are the positive things we can create in the world and how are they being created right now? There are a thousand points of entry to challenge this system and to shape alternative possibilities.

Shikshantar supports localization, to bring economy, ecology and education back home. It starts from the premise that we all have things we can contribute to the health and well-being of our place, whether they're monetary resources, in-kind materials, our time, our energy or our home. When we can bring these into the flow of sharing as a community, they can serve and support all of us. You can believe it or not, but I do: we have everything we need already.

We also support people who want to look at other possibilities for learning outside of the monopoly of schools and colleges. All around our communities exist an abundance of resources. They come in the form of artisans and artists, farmers and business people, home-makers and spiritual guides. Each brings imagination, practical skills, vision, and experience, which can be shared across generations.

For example, Shikshantar considers the entire city of Udaipur [Rajasthan] to be a 'learning city.' Children, youth, adults and elders are engaging in exchanges, community dialogues, unlearning workshops, local media, etc. They are challenging the model of urban living with its consumption, alienation, isolation and pollution, and figuring out how to live differently. We do all kinds of things: theater workshops, dance workshops, music, cooperative games. We make a lot of crafts with waste materials like rubber tire tubes and scraps of cloth. And we are into natural living and sustainability in the city: rooftop gardening, rainwater harvesting, and solar cooking. We also went around to different hotels and did a 'green leaf rating' survey to support more eco-friendly and culturally appropriate tourism in the city.

Now we're trying to launch a 'multi-versity' so youth can bypass college and learn via real-world apprenticeships and a peer community. They'll get practical skills ranging from filmmaking and desktop publishing to composting and weaving. The last part of the program gives them the opportunity to use their skills to start a business that's locally-rooted, environmentally-conscious, and community-based.

Part of my inspiration for my work comes from the idea that that larger system, the superstructure, only has as much hold on us as we continue to give it. The current prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile once told me that instead of thinking about 'destroying the system', I should think about 'renouncing it.' That's stuck with me. If we stop trying to fix or destroy the dominant system? and by that I mean violent, consumptive and inhumane economic-political-social institutions? and turn our attention to strengthening and growing small-scale points of light and power, we might find ourselves with the world we want to see.

Learning spaces and opportunities are all around us. It's only our own blinders that are blocking us. The more we can take off those blinders and start to see people and places as they are, for their strength and beauty, the more we can really learn and heal a lot of damage that's been done over many years and that's still being done today. The more we can see and listen to each other, I think, the more there is hope.

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women's movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

*The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of **Other Worlds**. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order.

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

1. Emem Okon: First hand account of organizing women in Nigeria
2. Coumba Touré: The Link to Humanity, Giving as a Way of Life
3. Helia Lajeunesse: A former slave fights slavery
4. Marcela Olivera: Water is where everything intersects
5. Melody Gonzalez: People of the sun
6. Ilda Martins de Souza: With every new day, you struggle for a better tomorrow
7. S. Ushakumari: Not wasting the waste
8. Shilpa Jain: We have everything we need: Reclaiming control of education
9. Nayeli Guzman: This land is my teacher: Preserving Native agriculture and traditions

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