

A NEW TWIST ON AN OLD WAY OF LIFE

Embracing “right livelihood” as practiced by the Indian community Shikshantar, one leaves behind ready-made conveniences and practices self-reliance in an effort to reconnect to Earth’s unending resources.

By Deborah Frieze

“Sarita kare na paan, vriksh na fal chaakhe kadi
Khet na khave dhaan, parhit neepjey sekhra.

The river never drinks its own water.
The tree never tastes its own fruit.
The field never consumes its own harvest.
They selflessly strive for the well-being of all those around them.”

—Mewari proverb, India



Sunny, part of the Indian community Shikshantar, prepares food for the community lunch. Meals at Shikshantar are an offering of generous hospitality and a time to reconnect with each other.

All over our ready-made world, a global culture has emerged that invites us to consume as much as we can and to accumulate more than we need. But what if a life well lived is one in which we each find an opportunity to give our gifts rather than to have our needs met? What if our purpose were defined by what we offer, rather than what we can secure for ourselves and our families? In the Indian city of Udaipur, the community of Shikshantar (The People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development) thrives on “gift culture.” Here, people are walking the path of right livelihood, a mindful way of living that balances service with self-interest and community vitality with economic security. Shikshantar’s co-founder Manish Jain invited me to visit so I could see gift culture in action.

Shikshantar is housed in a small building. It's a beehive in action—people everywhere discovering and inventing their own unique ways to grow and prepare food, maintain health, construct household goods, tell stories, create art.

A young woman sits at a *charkha*, one of the oldest forms of spinning wheels, and spins cotton into string that will be made into clothes or bags.



The Shikshantar family plays a game and talks about the future of their community (above). "The accumulation of stuff becomes our primary spiritual and psychological purpose and dominant social identity—rather than the quality of our relationships, our creativity or our consciousness," says Manish Jain, co-founder of Shikshantar.

A young man rolls old newspapers into long, thin tubes that will be woven into baskets and bowls. He's practicing *kabaad se jugaad*, the transformation of garbage (kabaad) into things that are useful, durable and beautiful.

Another man saws away at a piece of coconut shell out of which he will make earrings and necklaces to display at a monthly festival where community members exchange locally grown organic food, herbal medicine and handicrafts.

In the community's garden grow herbs that will provide the primary ingredients for homemade medicine, soap, tooth powder and massage oil. Cabbage grows under a fine dust of ash, which serves as a natural insect repellent. The same cabbage will be harvested for meals prepared at Shikshantar.

The creations that come from the cook are yet another story in resourcefulness. Cooking is done on the roof of the complex, where an "upcycled" solar cooker, made from a rusted trunk, broken mirror, rubber tire tubes and an old car windshield heats wholesome foods prepared without oils.

That's just what's happening inside Shikshantar. Even more is going on out in the community. Rohit, a 12-year-old apprentice, has invited me to join him on the daily *gobar* run. He doesn't explain—just hands me a bucket and beckons me to follow him out the door.

The streets outside Shikshantar are narrow and winding, crowded with cars, rickshaws, scooters, tourists—and quite a few cows. The good news about this—if you're practicing *swaraj* and rejecting the ready-made world—is that fuel, the cow dung kind, is abundant and free.

Rohit points out a heap of day-old dung drying in the sunshine and deposits it in my bucket. Making fuel from cow dung is easy, I'm told. Just grab a handful and shape it into patties. Lay the patties out to dry. The sun will take care of the rest, and soon you'll have easy-to-use fuel chips.

Today's *gobar*, however, has a different fate. It will be transformed into *amrit jal*, "the drink of the gods," a fast-track process for creating fertile soil. Whether making fuel chips or accelerating soil conversion, there is wisdom in this process of harnessing a resource that is freely available to ease the burden of daily energy consumption—and enable self-reliance. For Shikshantar, collecting *gobar* is part of its challenge to the patterns and practices of the ready-made world. In modern culture, most of us have become blind to the resources that nature so abundantly provides, and we've become ashamed of manual labor. *Gobar*, collected and transformed with our hands, is just one means of reconnecting us to Earth's unending riches.

After we return to Shikshantar and wash up, people join us from every direction to sit cross-legged on the floor and share the community lunch. After all, this is a family, just not one created entirely by blood, and like nearly all families everywhere, they break bread together—in this case, corn *rotis*—as a means of reconnecting. Ram comes around to spoon steaming heaps of rice, *patta gobhi* and *dal* on my plate. Before I've finished, he comes around again. And he'll keep coming around until I've worked my way through every last morsel on my plate, which must be wiped clean before Ram himself will finally sit down to eat his meal.

There is a saying in India: *Atithi Devo Bhava*, a Sanskrit phrase meaning the guest is god. It originated in the Upanishads, ancient Hindu texts that proclaimed feeding the guest—including the stranger—to be the noblest of all acts. Thus is hospitality gifted, not earned. No equal exchange of value must first be agreed upon. Ram's generosity offers me a glimpse into Shikshantar's heartfelt exploration into gift culture, the antidote to our ubiquitous transactional culture that has turned the accumulation of material resources into a near-sacred pursuit the world over.

The Advent of 'Gift Culture'

Manish has been exploring the dynamics of gift culture since he began his work at Shikshantar in 1999. Born in India and raised in the United States, Manish returned to India to “unlearn” his master's degree in education from Harvard and his training as an investment banker at Morgan Stanley. He holds this paradox with grace, his tall frame draped in *kurtas* one day and Western shirts the next, digging in the dirt today and flying off to keynote an international conference tomorrow. But little makes him happier than spending the afternoon at Shikshantar engaged in conversations that challenge our assumptions about the world.

“For thousands of years, we've known that having more stuff doesn't give you happiness and fulfillment,” Manish begins. “But that basic wisdom has slowly been eroded within the span of a couple generations. Growth promises some illusion of greater freedom and security—if I accumulate more stuff, I don't have to depend on others; I don't have to negotiate with others; I have a new kind of power. The accumulation of stuff becomes our primary spiritual and psychological purpose and dominant social identity—rather than

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"Kabaad se jugaad" is the transformation of garbage into useful things. Above, Shreya gathers gobar, or cow dung, to be used as fuel by the Shikshantar community. Below, Manoj uses a solar cooker made from a rusted trunk and an old car windshield to cook lunch.

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the quality of our relationships, our creativity or our consciousness.”

He dubs this mode of thinking the *homo economicus* way of life: Value can be quantified and measured; our sense of security is derived from the quantity of resources we have rather than the quality of relationships we’re in. We have a right to acquire as many resources as we can; we have a right to extract natural resources from the earth. We store surpluses to produce future wealth. Since price goes up when supply is constrained, inducing scarcity can generate wealth.

But as a consequence of leading the *homo economicus* way of life, we’re now living in a culture of destruction. “In transactional culture, we use and throw away people, resources and ideas,” Manish continues. “Everything can be converted into a commodity until there’s nothing sacred left. Gandhi talked about the notion of trusteeship: We are not really owners of anything. Nature doesn’t work with ownership. We are guardians or trustees, stewarding

resources that are part of a commons of human beings and life on the planet.”

Gandhi saw trusteeship as a means of rebuilding an egalitarian society. It would be a pathway back toward right livelihood and sufficiency. He wrote: “Supposing I have come by a fair amount of wealth—either by way of legacy, or by means of trade and industry—I must know that all that wealth does not belong to me; what belongs to me is the right to an honorable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community.”

Gift culture is about trusteeship, about stewarding the commons rather than ourselves. It’s about taking care of the whole so that everyone has enough. We offer what we can, and we value gifts on our own terms—rather than those dictated by the marketplace. We turn to one another for our needs—to local businesses, teachers, artists, gardeners, craftspeople—rather than to the anonymity of the global marketplace. We walk out of our identity as *homo economicus*, and we walk on to discover the patterns and practices of *homo giftus*.

Homo giftus offers goods and services freely, without any expectation of return. Value is measured by the quality of our relationships rather than the quantity of our profit. Our capacity to give is infinite, unconstrained by shortages and fear of scarcity.

What if this is human nature? Being at Shikshantar has reminded me that people are innately generous—that we want to give our time and talent to one another, that we want to support each other spontaneously, when we see a need or opportunity. Perhaps we can’t live in gift culture all the time. But we can begin to explore the edge between seeking security and trusting that we’ll find what we need. We can experiment with what it would be like to participate in the transactional economy just enough to have what we need—and to gift out everything else. ■

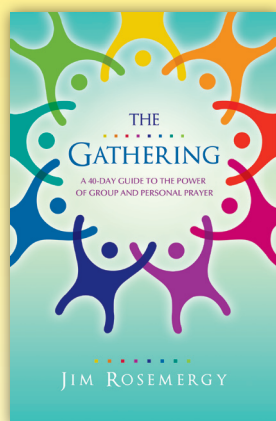
Note: This article is adapted from a chapter in *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey Into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze. Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco, 2011.

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