

# NO DIPLOMAS IN ARCHITECTURE

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*The Indian organisation, Shikshantar, runs a campaign against academic qualifications. They have published many relevant stories. This is one of them.*

We are involved with a small learning center for tribal children. For us, this whole issue of formal degrees and diplomas as society's way of labeling a person as 'useful' or 'useless' is a very crucial issue. Whole communities in rural areas are getting destroyed due to this labeling. The crucial aspect is that the certification process is designed to weed out 'failures' more than to identify capabilities. Yet how many persons in the real world would offer a job to a person purely on the basis of one's possession of a certificate without an interview? However, most would not consider employing someone because s/he failed a particular degree.

Even more importantly the school exam certification leaves such a deep scar of 'incapability' that most people carry a lifelong feeling of low self-esteem. Our most important task here in our centre is to attempt to keep the children's self-esteem intact. Our long-term goal is to wean away the children [and, more importantly, the parents] from laying too much importance on the exam result.

We believe that it is possible for us to show the joy of learning and to make children, as well as adults, realize that learning can be a lifelong enriching process that will help in living with dignity. Eventually, our center should become a space for both children and adults, where adults can access information and dialogue at community-level to help them make informed choices. The biggest damage our schools do is to reduce people to passive receivers of packaged knowledge. Perhaps this is what schools are meant to do and they are very good at it!

We both graduated with a degree in architecture and got thoroughly disgusted with the profession as we saw it: completely dehumanizing, excessively materialistic, urban-biased and without any relevance to the needs of the vast majority of the people.

So we moved to a rural area with the idea that we wanted to work with communities. We wanted to find useful things to do (preferably avoiding

architecture!). We got an opportunity at Gandhigram, near Madurai, to understand how houses are built by villagers using local materials. We started learning with villagers how natural materials, such as mud, are used and we started to make improvisations. We also made use of the opportunities to build as a place to learn for ourselves and, more importantly, for the villagers to upgrade their building skills.

Somehow, slowly people came to know what we were up to and, from all over south India, many came to us asking us to build for them using local materials. Soon we were doing small projects in many rural areas, training small groups in different locations. All our major projects just happened, without us having to go and ask for work. We even got a corporate client with whom we had a long innings of very unconventional work! And of course, nobody ever asked us to show our degrees! In every case, we were asked to do a job because of what we had already done and the skills that we picked up as we kept working.

Looking back, we feel we have accumulated a unique set of experiences: working with rural communities, with so called 'unskilled' people, training, designing, building using local materials, etc. None of this is unique in itself, but the combination comes useful in many unconventional situations (post-disaster, for example). But we also feel this would not have happened had we been tied down by the narrow definitions of our profession, taught to us in our formal education. We have come to the point of refusing to think of ourselves as 'professionals' and 'architects'.

Looking around, we find that most people in our country learn useful skills through apprenticeship. It is very obvious in the informal sector, but actually if one thinks carefully, we all learn very many crucial skills in our first job – even after a formal degree, not to mention acquiring of new skills as things in the field change.

Actually, architecture used to be taught through apprenticeship until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Even when we were in college 20 years back, there used to be apprentices who would come for evening classes. This has changed dramatically. In the informal sector, there is much exploitation of apprentices and no culture of pride in teaching/ learning skills – mainly due to the formal sector's dominance in our consciousness. Ideally, we should break this deep divide between learning at 'work' and learning in institutions (They have their plus points in giving wider exposure, and feeling of belonging to and learning from peers.)

Our experience taught us another valuable lesson: refusing to accept the narrow confines of what we ought to do in life for a living. 'Super-specialization' is the curse of modernity! We freed our minds and opened enormous possibilities of what one could do. When our children were born, we got fascinated with their learning. We saw how much damage schools do to children's learning abilities and their 'self-image'. So for the past four years,

we have started working with tribal children in a remote village (almost full-time), and we are enjoying this new role we have taken on.

We feel that 'good work', meaningful and satisfying work, is a basic human need, and also work has lot more meaning than just eeking out a living. Our most satisfying work has been work we have done as a gift for our close friends. The word 'work' itself has got corrupted to mean something that 'has to be done', and so without any fun or happiness associated with it. If every work situation can be seen as a learning experience, then so much more fun can be derived, and the learning itself becomes a reward.

The challenge in a sense is to delink 'work' from 'jobs'. We feel in our country, we really have a big advantage, as it is possible to live a materially simple way, yet comfortably. For example, we can build a thatch and mud house, such as ours, very inexpensively, something we are told is impossible to do in so-called developed countries, as the insurance costs would be prohibitive and the authorities won't just let you put up one without permissions. This simplicity frees us from the need to look for jobs! Unfortunately, we are getting 'developed' now and are jumping onto the bandwagon of high-stress 12-14 hour work days, just to live 'decent', 'developed' lifestyles!

In the past 25 years, we have worked with people who are mostly school dropouts; there is no question of degrees here. We have worked with people with 'professional' skills, who all believe that modern skills such as 'nursing', 'designing buildings', 'teaching children', 'documentation', 'accounting', can all be taught on the job to people who hold no degrees. In our experience, we actually prefer unschooled minds as they are much more open to learning and are better at acquiring skills! In that sense, degrees are important – they are 'danger signs' in our work!