

**CO-LEARNING  
WITH KANKU:  
some experiences  
from 2006**

*Families Learning Together*

Dear Friends and Family-

We decided to put together this little booklet to celebrate the beautiful unfolding of 2006 together with Kanku and with each other. We hope that it will inspire you to share your stories of self-organized learning with us.

There are several commonly asked questions that we thought we should address:

*"What is Kanku doing if she doesn't go to school? How will she learn?"*

We have seen that Kanku chooses what is authentic and meaningful for her and who she wants to take inspiration from. She is weaving her own learning web motivated by love, curiosity and play.

*"Won't she be socially dysfunctional? How will she have any friends?"*

We believe that she should freely interact with beings of all shapes, sizes and species. For more about this, please go through this booklet.

*"What about reading and writing?"*

We have not tried to force reading, writing or numeracy on Kanku. Not even ABCs. We don't feel any urgency. We feel it is more important for her to evolve her various senses and sensitivities. There are books sitting around the house and Shikshantar for her to pick up if she is interested. We read stories to her whenever she asks. She prefers making up stories and songs with us. Once in a while, she likes having us read what's written on the cover of chocolate wrappers and on bottles of creams/lotions and lipsticks to her.

*"Oh, you mean you are homeschooling."*

We are not homeschooling Kanku. We do not want to make our home into a school or any other space into a school. Nor do we want to limit Kanku to just being at home. We have no curriculum, no textbooks, no achievement milestones, no teaching aids, no teachers, no certificates, no models, no competitions, and... no regrets. From time to time, we do take her for 'fieldtrips' to schools and colleges to help with workshops we host. While she doesn't really care for the classrooms, we have



noticed that she likes to hang out and have samosas in the canteen. She spends most of her afternoons in Shikshantar, bringing her own unique energy to our team.

Our efforts in building lots of intergenerational relationships as part of the Udaipur as a Learning City process <[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html)> has helped to open up many, many wonderful options around the community for her (and for all of us). We are also fortunate that many friends and relatives keep visiting us at home and at Shikshantar.

Kanku has helped us to grow in new ways. She has given us the opportunity to face and unlearn many of our schooled conditionings. One of the most important things we have had to let go of is making constant comparisons between Kanku and other children. Our questions about our own lifestyles have also deepened with her presence. This past year, we have taken on several new learning experiments together (e.g. Vidhi with natural dyeing, Manish with healthy cooking, Shilpa with the guitar).

We hope to have your friendship as we co-create many more learning adventures in 2007 and beyond.

Love,  
Vidhi, Manish and Shilpa



friends, friends, friends...  
of all shapes, sizes, species

On any given evening, you will find a dance party going on at 83, Adinath Nagar (sometimes, in Shikshantar, in the innermost room, too!). Kanku and I let loose and go crazy, trying out all kinds of dance moves. Shaking our heads, bumping our bottoms, rolling around on the ground... anything goes! What is the most fun is seeing how Kanku is a natural at choreography. She knows what kind of moves go with each kind of music; she creates specific movements for Rajasthani music; others for Bollywood; still others for Western pop. I see that she has no limitations for her own movements. The only thing that slows her down is her own flair for dramatics, needing her *langa* or *oodhni* to be just so, or her audience to watch her! Nor does she copy me. Instead, she tries to get me to follow her! (which sometimes I agree to and other times I resist.) We have a ton of fun, laughing, playing, jumping about...

My mom sometimes suggest that I should teach her steps. Obviously, she forgets how 'un-teachable' Kanku is! And also, I don't want to 'teach' her anything — mainly because I feel too much discipline early on curbs creativity and spontaneity (if you have recently been to a *sangeet* music party in an Indian wedding, you'll know what I mean). Plus, it can be damaging to her body to force certain movements too early. But most importantly, I feel I keep getting new ideas from her — why disturb that? It's better that we shake our booty and learn together...

- Shilpa Bhua



dancing with kiku



trying out some new steps  
with rodrigo in mexico



playing with *pois*  
(spinning balls made of waste materials)  
at the *hamo desi mela* at Shikshantar



soaking up the  
beauty of  
oaxaca, mexico with  
nitin

The past few mornings haven't been like Udaipur, when you wake me with your sonorous voice calling my name in the very special way, which only you can intone. "Nitaaan, lets us make tea," you say and the morning begins in right earnest. You want to sit near the gas stove. I have to reluctantly agree. From crushing the ginger in the white marble bowl, to putting the sugar and tea leaves into the water with your wavering hand but never spilling it; from other

small things which you so lovingly accomplish to finally having the hot tea with crunchy toasts while discussing sweet nothings. These are magic moments which I savour as much as the tea which we both have made.

There is other thing which I want to tell you - I especially liked the way you answered when your grand dad asked you to call me uncle. You said that I liked being called "Nitaaan" and had asked me immediately, nodding your head, wasn't it so. Yes dear I like it that way, very much and hope you keep calling me like that for ever. You know, back in Nashik tea doesn't taste the same and I miss our morning conversations. You touch the child in me each morning and I like that because I become tender, vulnerable and real. I would like to maintain these feelings throughout my life but we adults don't often appreciate such state of being and like to slip into the adult roles at moments notice.

- Nitin (godparent)



birdwatching during TV Turnoff Week



helping out Shanta in the  
Fatehpura subzi mandi

## In and Around Udaipur...



working with Nirmal, Megan, Mitali and  
Rohit on the potter's wheel  
at Shikshantar



riding on an overnight cycle yatra  
to Thoor village



Most relatives of my generation felt extremely hesitant to expose Kanku to all of the mourning ceremonies that took place after my Grandmother passed away last year... for us, however, it was a non-compromisable decision - when a real life situation needs to be faced it needs to be shared by all of us a family. For Kanku, I think it was a very important experience simply because she is very close to our grandparents. She has always seen them as her friends and she doesn't really fear or disrespect them because of the age difference. Her hugs and kisses to my grandmother a few hours before she passed away really made me think about how insensitive we are making our children and ourselves because we give school exams and television more priority in our lives. (She was the only person from her generation to attend.) Some of my respected relatives tried to distract Kanku by enticing her with the television or with a toy when my Grandmother was being taken for cremation but Kanku did not want to do anything but sit beside me and my parents to console us and wipe our tears. All she wanted to know was why we were so sad when Baiji had gone to a place where she was getting *shanti*.

- Mama (Vidhi)



kanku the beautician:  
doing jia's hair  
(kanku's great-grandmother)

Kanku has always been fond of swimming. Whenever we saw a pool, she would try to jump in (oftentimes without even taking her clothes off). This past year we finally had good rains in Udaipur. One day last August, Shammi suggested we all go for a swim in Fateh Sagar lake. I was a little hesitant because I thought that the water would be dirty. But Kanku said she really wanted to go so I decided to give it a try. We all had a blast together.

From that day on, Kanku was keen to go everyday and provided the motivation for me on those days when I was feeling lazy. Every morning she would get up really early and wake up everyone in the house to get ready to go for a swim.

We have never taught her how to swim. But I have been amazed how she has somehow managed to figure out by herself how to maneuver around while wearing an inflatable innertube.

The confident swimmers would swim everyday to a pole situated in the middle of the lake. I would tell Kanku to stay in her inner tube in the shallow part near the edge of the lake when I would swim to the pole. One day she announced that she wanted to swim to the middle with me in her tube. I was a little fearful but several other friends were around so I agreed. I thought she would get tired and come back to shore in a few minutes. But she kept on going. She didn't panic when she got tired. Slowly but surely she and I struggled to reach the pole...Basking in the sun, we sat grinning at each other. It was an awesome moment as if we had just climbed Mt. Everest together. - **Baba (Manish)**





"i just love dressing up for *shaadis*!"



fun with all the Daga family at Versha Bhua's wedding



celebrating at Wasif and Ambreen's wedding in Pakistan

This past year Kanku was fond of taking walks in the evenings and would want company. I would often go with her. She would like to walk into any house and chat with the people there. I would some times try to dissuade her as I didn't know those people and I would feel embarrassed going into their houses. She would just walk right into their living room, their kitchen or bedroom and people were generally happy to see her around. She doesn't have any sense of seeing other people as strangers or needing an introduction to interact with them -- unlike most adults.



While walking down the street she would just rush to any dog or a cow and just pat them on their head. Theoretically, I have known that animals generally don't harm kids, and even when dogs growl at kids it's just a gentle warning, or when dogs nip at the kids it is just to dissuade them. Seeing Kanku rush to the dogs and cows, I would sometimes get scared and be on the guard, but nothing ever happened. Most of the time I would see that the animals were welcoming of her affection. Kids are basically social, and we as adults have been conditioned to become anti-social and suspicious of other humans, of animals and nature.

- **Shammi, Shikshantar family**

"KA... KAK... Who is there oh! Is it Kanku?" Then she says, "Totaa mama."

I sometimes wonder that does she know my real name? Then I ask her, what is my name, she replies, "Totaa."

"NOooo... my other name." Then she says, "Vishal."

Thank God she knows my name. Some people ask why does she always call me Totaa? Why not? This nickname is given to me by her.

Kanku sometimes picks up a book from the Shikshantar library and asks me to read for her. She loves to hear stories and to ask questions about the stories. She tells me that some of the characters came to my house, I made tea for them and then we went together to this place. This makes me feel that in her imagination she is building relationships with everything. Her favorite book is about two dragons and a brave girl which is in the ARABIC language. Neither me nor anyone I have met in my life can read that book. But I have read that book to her, I think 10 or 15 times. I always make up different stories about the girl and the dragons. She enjoys that too.

**-Vishal, Shikshantar family**



"Kanku, Kanku, where are you? Come, lets make a cake!" She says, "Oh Cake!" and comes running to me. Then it's all about us pouring in all the ingredients one by one and Kanku mixing it with her fingers. I love the way she likes to sit by the stove and cook. Actually, I have always seen Kanku more interested in making a cake than in eating it. She loves cooking up her own new recipes.

Once in a while, when I am in the kitchen at Shikshantar I can see Kanku sneaking in and quietly picking up a *bartan* (pot) and running out with it. Then she starts HER cooking. Sometimes I enter the kitchen to find a *bartan* full of Kankus' favorite ingredients...different attas and sugar and a lot of water. She herself is also full of them -- her nose, her hair, her clothes. That really amuses me and I really love to clean up the mess that she makes every single day. I really believe that in the coming years I will really find a GREAT cooking partner in Kanku the little chef.

- Sunny, Shikshantar family





## The Traveling Spirit

I didn't have to think twice when I decided to go the village of Akola to learn more about natural colors and dye-ing because I knew Kanku would also love to dip and dig into them. We happened to stay with one of the artisan families and that was great because I thought that Kanku would be with us while we were learning about colors, and the rest of the time we would all explore interesting things happening in the village. But for the 3 days that we were there I think Kanku must have only spent 2-3 hours with us in the workshop. Otherwise, she had made her own friends with all the village folks and she was roaming about on her own. She was happy to run from one house to the other and ask for different things like *chaach*, *mahendi*, *lahengas*, *bakri ke bache*... By the end of the second day, most of the villagers knew her. A few of the young children in the village got lucky and managed to bunk school because of her.

- Mama (Vidhi)



at colors of nature  
(auroville)



Last year was also the first time Kanku travelled alone without Vidhi, her mom. Kanku was quite excited; she was going to her dear friends Qudrat and Ajanmya's house in Ahmedabad, it was actually Vidhi who needed to be pacified! I was going to go with her and Manish.



at Quddu's home. Kanku's excitement has made her hyperactive. Quddu, Aju and she are like The Troublesome Three. I am asked to baby-sit them, which actually means running in three different directions to keep up.

The night before we leave Vidhi packs Kanku's bag and lectures me on all of Kanku's oddities (like the laddoos she eats first thing after getting up at 5 am every morning and her numerous love-in-Tokyos which she is prone to lose) and what I should do about them. The next morning dawns and we all are made to get up quite early (a rare phenomenon in the Jain household!). We need to wake Kanku now. We're afraid she'll be cranky and sleepy, but she's as fresh as a newly bloomed flower and gets out of bed with this radiant smile on her face! "We're leaving! We're going to Quddu's house!" she says happily. Vidhi is much more relaxed now. We leave and Kanku is still smiling, which is what she does all through the bus ride. We reach A'bad in the afternoon. We're finally

After an afternoon of faces messed with melted chocolate, smelly and wet pants, cat-fights, tears, scratches and lots of running, hunting and chasing, I finally get to lie down with a book. Not for long. Suddenly, three bodies are on top of me, one on my head, one on my stomach and one on the legs, I think, but in such a situation I can't be trusted to remember. I also think I screamed. I manage to get all of them off me, and complain in general about the no-discipline of unschooled kids. Somebody reminds me that I too don't go to school! That night there is rasa-garba going on downstairs so we join in. Kanku, who has been looking forward to this all through is excited at first but soon gets tired of the din. She dances for a little while and then gets into her cranky moods. Time for bed!

The next day, after eating her morning laddoos and having a bath in a little tub with Quddu and Aju (and me looking on) the rest of the day passes smoothly except for a time when she poops into her panty and doesn't tell anyone. We eventually trace the smell to her and thankfully I don't have the cleaning job. I have to go back to Nashik then and Kanku is still sleeping, so I just give a kiss on her little forehead and leave.

For Kanku it has obviously been a big step in growing up, and so it has for me too, I think. Taking care of someone so little and so much fun has been beautiful. Watching Kanku's friendships develop with Quddu and Aju and the way they are choosing their own ways of

learning and understanding. Kanku is a child of a large community, with everyone around her caring for her and nurturing her in her growing-up.

I think my relationship with Kanku is also very nice, a sort-of sisterly as well as a care-giver. Since I don't have any siblings, this was the first time I too was in this role of actually being in place of a mother to her... it's a good feeling, with a lot of little frustrations, for sure. Sometimes I was left wondering why I was the one who had to baby-sit this little terror and then suddenly Kanku launches herself at you in a big bear hug (even if her hands are muddy and obviously anyone can guess that she wants candy, gum or something from me)...



At that time you just feel the most special thing in the world.

I later learn that Kanku doesn't want to go back to Udaipur. Manish and Vidhi (on the phone) have to persuade her that there is going to be a big wedding in Udaipur for which she can wear many lehengas and bindis, and then she is ready to go!

- Sakhi



Osher-Shanti's birthday party  
Families Learning Together gathering  
Goa



catching some sun and surf with her  
grandmother Leela Dadi and Baba  
in Huatulco, Mexico

Last November, we decided to join Kanku, Vidhi and Manish for the Families Gathering in Goa. There we met many families who do not send their children to school. They were all discussing exciting issues and challenges related to their experiences. We were also asked about how we felt about Kanku not going to school. Our reply was a very diplomatic. We said that any decision that Manish and Vidhi make for Kanku could never be wrong. But after spending time with everyone in Goa and observing all the activities very closely, we started to think

more deeply about our roles in Kanku life.

Kanku is learning a lot through her day to day interactions and activities in Shikshantar. At this tender age, she sometimes says and does things that most much-older people would never do. One example is her persistence against using plastic bags. One day we brought some oil and soaps in a plastic bag and she immediately asked, 'Nana-Nani why did you bring all these in a plastic bag?' We really felt quite shocked. Another similar thing happened when we were driving past Fatehsagar lake and she saw a few plastic and thermocol glasses floating around in the water. She kept saying "Nana, take these out." Also, she saw some people washing clothes in the lake and shouted "Why are you putting all this soap in the water? You are dirtying the water and all the fish will die." Little experiences like these make us feel confident that she is growing up beautifully in liberated and pressure-free environments.

- Ashok Nana and Usha Nani



It was late August, and Israel's attack on Lebanon was continuing in full force. Some friends from Beirut, a film collective called Beirut DC, sent me a four-minute video letter they had put together, sharing their experience in the moment. It was a very powerful film, in Arabic with English and French subtitling.

I was watching the film for the third time, when Kanku came to sit with me. We watched the film together. When my friend, Simon, appeared on the screen, I pointed to him and said to Kanku, "That's my friend." So when the next girl came up on the screen, Kanku pointed to her and said to me, "That's my friend." I smiled at first, but then she said something that really surprised and touched me. She said [in Hindi], "She looks sad. I will take her into my arms, hold her and tell her not to be sad. Everything will be okay." Now, the girl wasn't crying or showing any other outward form of sadness. But Kanku, without knowing Arabic, English or French, could pick up on the emotion of the film — and then could respond so sensitively. That was an amazing moment and really affirmed for me the fundamental simplicity of human connection. It gives me a lot of hope for our future.

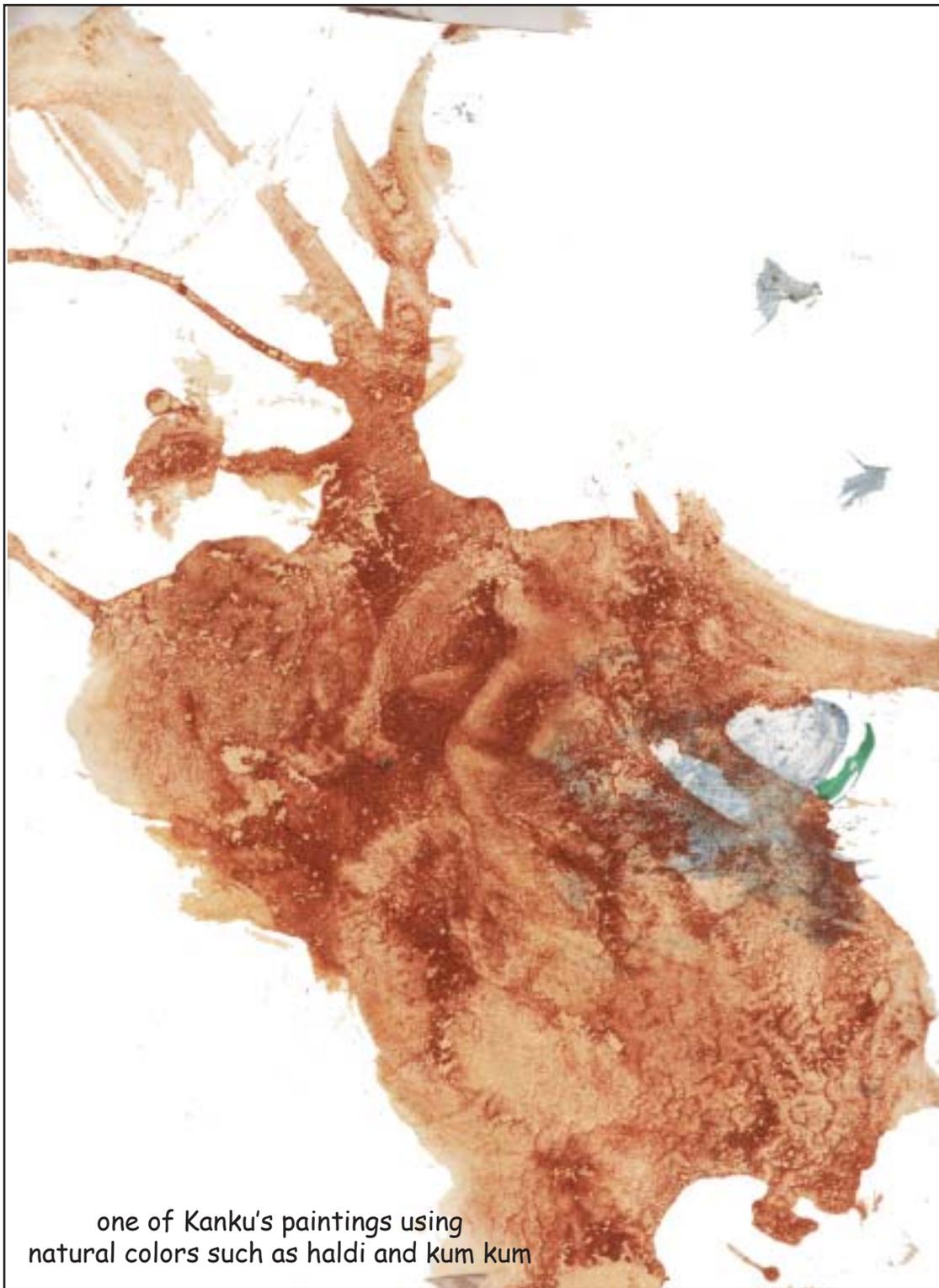
- Shilpa Bhua



I have been spending a lot of time with Kanku in Shikshantar. She loves to sit by me to spin the charkha and paint. But the favorite thing that we do together is making things out of clay and mud. We both love it. She loves getting the clay ready, mixing it and using the potter's wheel. It really reminds me of my childhood, because I could also spend hours messing around with clay. I love her curiosity to experiment with new things. She keeps inspiring me to do rather unimaginable things with clay.

One rather busy day, she came up to me when I was working with clay. I tried to stop her from digging into it by telling her that her clothes will get dirty. She insisted she just had to do it. After that, it was just a matter of a few minutes and she was full of clay from top to bottom. She was ecstatic with it. This made me realize that it was my fault to think that something terrible would happen if her clothes got dirty... because she was in total bliss and doing exactly what she wanted to, with total excitement.

- Nirmal, Shikshantar family



one of Kanku's paintings using  
natural colors such as haldi and kum kum

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