

### **Tree of Learning – Shreya Janssens-Sannon**

“But I’m not an artist!” I thought, “How can I possibly help paint a mural?!” And yet, despite my anxiety, there I was, in the sunshine, holding a brush, with my friend, Nirmal, saying: “Just go ahead”.

We were working on a mural, that both in process and as project, embodied the goals of “Udaipur as a Learning City”  
<[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html)>

Nirmal wanted to challenge several dominant assumptions:

- the attitude of only focusing on people’s problems, instead of recognizing and appreciating their strengths;
- the idea that only professional artists have the right and ability to create art; and
- the notion that wall spaces can only serve as advertising space.

Making a family mural not only was an attempt to reclaim and beautify public spaces, but also to provide opportunities for creative expression, community building and intergenerational work.

Nirmal designed the mural to represent his family; it would be painted on the wall outside their home. He spoke with them to determine each member’s strengths and interest, in order to showcase their uniqueness. He also thought about how they come together as a whole family.



Nirmal then settled on a metaphor — a tree — and sketched what to include on each of the branches to represent his family. For example, to represent

his youngest sister, he used a bicycle because whatever work she has, she completes quickly. For his younger brother he used the symbol of a rope because of his strength of body and spirit. For himself, he used the symbol of a river because he is easygoing; all the tension or sadness in his heart he can wash away and create friendships anew. For his mother he created a branch with fields and farming, since that was what she enjoyed doing when they lived in the village. In the middle of the tree trunk, he created a *rakhi* bracelet, which usually symbolizes the bond between brothers and sisters, but in this case served to unify and represent the love and closeness between all the members of the family.



The mural was still in its early stages, and I didn't know what exactly Nirmal wanted. I was worried that if I put brush to paint, I might ruin what he had imagined. So I asked a million questions: What color do you want? What kind of designs should I create? Should I paint on this side? Should I make it smaller? His answers to all my questions were easy going and vague; they always seemed to be "Make whatever you want."



My past group work experience had taught me that usually the process is strictly controlled by one leader who informs others of what to do in order to realize his/her vision. In this situation, however, while Nirmal had created a sketch, so much of the process was fluid. He trusted every one involved and that trust allowed other people to be creative and to experiment. In the end, the mural reflected everyone's eclectic style. Every day, as different people worked – from siblings to friends to neighborhood children – it became more and more detailed, and more and more beautiful. In the end, it was even more complex than I could have imagined, because the process involved trust in other peoples' creativity.

In addition to the creative process, the other valuable lesson I learned was the experience of community. We made the mural with so many people – whoever was available and free was recruited to come along. We met new friends, sharing conversation and song as we painted. Everyone from adults to infants participated. As members of Nirmal's family became free – having finished their work or school – they would get a brush and pick up where they left off. Because it was a public mural, it also attracted the attention of passer-bys, some who stayed to watch and some who stayed to talk. Children in the neighborhood would come by regularly as soon as the paints were put outside. They would watch, and after a few days of observation, began to dip their hands in the paint and make little designs of their own nearby. Each day, before and after the mural making, we would also sit inside and visit with Nirmal's family – talking and learning about each other, drinking tea and looking at Nirmal's art work.



This experience helped to both demystify and democratize art for me. I learned that you do not have to be an expert to make large and public art, and that you do not have to do it alone. Nirmal spoke with neighborhood residents who passed by his mural and answered their queries about it. He explained the metaphors behind the mural's content and why he created it. Some people responded by asking why he had chosen to illustrate something

as specific as people's work, instead of other broader topics. Nirmal responded by saying that he wanted to start by honoring the work that everyone did at home and then extending his mural to other topics. Local children also responded with interest and said that they too wanted to create a mural at their house, and Nirmal will soon be talking to them and their families about working on one together.

The excitement is contagious! Since participating in this project, I have spoken with my own family about joint mural making. I still have to convince my mother to let us use a large wall of her house, but at least we're starting to dream of the possibilities!

