

Filling the gap, the SIDH way

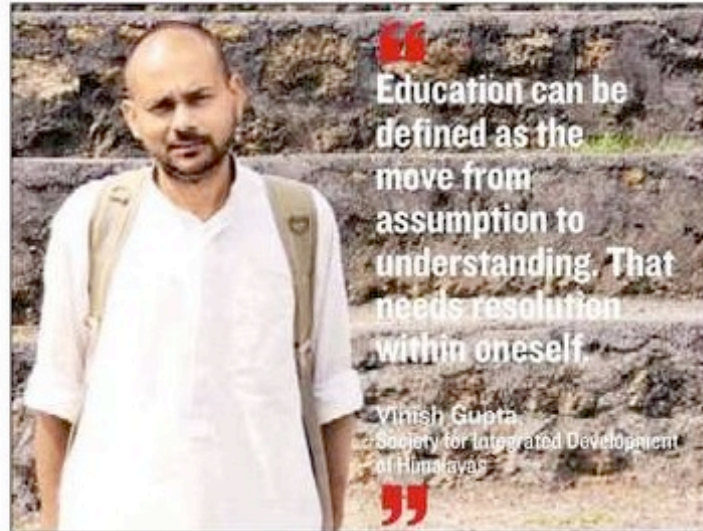
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A UNIQUE educational experiment is brewing in a small village nestled in the Garhwal hills of Uttarakhand.

The Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas (SIDH), an NGO dedicated to community-based learning, has set up India's first Gap Year College on its 2-acre campus 12 kilometres outside Mussoorie. The only other effort of its kind in the country, by the Krishnamurti Foundation in Bangalore, closed down a few years ago.

The 9-month course starting July 15 would have a visiting faculty exploring modules such as critical analysis, environment, communication and creative design.

To be eligible, you just need to have passed high school, though graduates are "preferred". Some 12 such students from around the world have already signed up for the residential course by paying the fee of Rs 50,000 (for Indians) or \$5,000 (for foreign nationals).



It would not substitute a college degree, but would complement it. A Jeevan Vidya (life skills) workshop held at the campus last week introduced the concept the college would be run on — there would be no room for pedagogy and even fundamental concepts would be open to questioning. The idea is to give the students analytical tools to help them resolve the usual Big Question of the age: what to do with their lives and careers. But the methods of instruction would be far from usual.

Vinish Gupta, an IITian who is

one of the principal administrators, says, "For one, we may ask the students to graze sheep on these terraced hills."

During a gap year course SIDH ran for the rural youth of the region — a programme lauded in a 2005 Unesco report — the students were dropped many hills away in the next district and asked to get back without begging or borrowing. They performed

manual labour at some of the villages on the way to earn the meagre amounts needed to take the bus rides back.

The new course would not be the only gap to be filled by SIDH. This 20-year-old institution runs eight schools in 40 nearby villages, trains teachers from more than 50 district schools, publishes three educational magazines, and augments local employment by selling the handicraft unique to the Jaunpur region of Tehri.

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