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Interviewer: Namrata Dewanjee

VII Sem | RVCA

Redefining Rural and Urbanscape through Design

What was Nivasa's original idea? How did it all start?

Nivasa started to help migration workers who migrated from other states. When a large construction project is coming up, they bring construction workers from outside the city like North Eastern parts of Karnataka, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, that is, migrants from poorer parts of the country looking for jobs. When agriculture fails in their parts of the country, they start migrating to the city to work in the construction industry.

According to BOCW, the government mandates it that the construction companies have to provide accommodation. So, all the workers stay on site or somewhere close by. The construction companies or the builders who have to provide housing do not want to spend a lot of money on the housing projects of the construction workers- they end up building accommodation with less than humane living conditions. The shelters lack sanitary facilities and do not have access to safe drinking water. The shelters are overcrowded, sometimes up to twenty people from different parts of the country under one roof. These living conditions affect the workers mentally and physically. One lacks privacy and frequent quarrels break out due to conflict of interests. Workers deal with substance addictions and violence.

Do the workers migrate back to where they are from originally?

When the workers come to the city, they come as unskilled labors. During their time working on the projects, they gain experiences and go on to set up their own shops based on their specialization. Once, they are established they bring in their families, migrating from rural to an urban setting. If they choose not to migrate their entire families, they visit their families for a week or two during festivals. After the project is complete, the shelter is either discarded or derigged.

Could you describe some of Nivasa's projects?

Project Suitcase is for landless like the construction workers. It is completely dismantlable and portable. There are people in rural areas cannot afford to build on the land which they own, and end up living in shacks. Nivasa helps them by providing them a "suitcase" unit which can later be used for bike parking and cowsheds- the unit becoming a part of the house that gets built there eventually.

Project Griha, on the other hand focuses on redevelopment of villages- we research on the ecology and culture and develop a prototype. Any new technology is met with reluctance in rural settings. Prototypes help educate people and demonstrate the use of new construction techniques and materials.

Where does Nivasa get its funding from?

Nivasa gets its funding from grants from CSR funds from corporate firms. They also benefit from Government schemes like MGNREGA which fund public projects and housing.

Do you think migration is increasing or is it reaching a plateau?

It can never reach a plateau. Our cities are constantly growing entities and the growth is constantly happening due to influx. Capitalistic nature of the society increases the gap between the rich and poor. Striving for more is human nature.

Do you think it is a good model?

No, after a certain extent migration is a reflection of the short coming of the government and its regimes. Migration happens because the farmer cannot farm in their own land. This is a product of the government policies, climate change, etc. The government should empower the people in the rural areas with proper facilities like job opportunities, suitable living habitats and proper drinking water. That is when the pressure on cities will alleviate.

If people do not migrate, won't we have a shortage of workers in the city?

I am not against migration. I am against overburdening the cities. There is a sweet spot that there is enough workspace in the cities to build the houses but people are happy in their villages. Beyond all of this, the city should treat the workers like human beings. Cities are extremely exclusionary- the development happens in and around places that serve a higher economic class. We need people to build our houses but we need to treat them right as well.

What backlash did you face when building in villages?

People are unwilling to accept new technology in the villages. There are thoughts like "it will wash away in the rain" or "it won't be stable" but they can be changed by creating prototypes and live demonstrations.

Do you think architecture has more of a part to play than be a roof over someone's head?

You can never see architecture in isolation. Government policies and various other factors influence architecture heavily. It also has a social responsibility.

How has COVID-19 affected Nivasa? Has it stalled your efforts?

"It has, we were doing two anganwadis and we lost our contractor. The building projects have been delayed by 6 months. Communication with contractors have moved online and regular programs like alcohol deaddiction and drug deaddiction and interactive sessions have stopped.

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What are your plans for the future?

I want to undo the effects of Green Revolution on the farmer and work towards farms which help the farmers practice ecologically sensitive farming methods, who are used to tractors and pesticides. "The idea is to build a prototype farm" to demonstrate the new sustainable techniques and practices.

Nivasa also takes volunteers and to contribute or find more details visit their website and social media channels.