



Sneha Gokhale
Program manager at SELCO FOUNDATION

Interviewer: Divya Darshini A
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The trial of migration : Living Norms

The ten-year-old, non-profitable organisation – “SELCO “, stemmed out from the social enterprise that looked at energy access for the last mile rural initiative in Karnataka, is currently dealing with the aspects of climate change, energy efficiency and poverty elevation. The following is based on the conversation with Sneha Gokhale, program manager at SELCO foundation.

Sneha Gokhale, pursued Bachelor of Architecture from Bombay academy of Architecture in 2001 and master’s in urban planning from IHS Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Initially working in a firm where the major client was the developer and dealing with multi-storeyed building, she found the work to be monotonous and less creative. ‘I was keener to look at energy efficiency and basic concepts like daylighting, cross – ventilation which were not seen in the developer driven design at commercial set up, so I took up the risk to explore something new. It wasn’t new per say but something not everybody takes up, and that’s how my journey to work for migrated and marginalized/vulnerable community started’said Sneha.

Having an architect in an energy driven set up makes people realise that the need for energy during daytime (for instance most of the houses require lighting during daytime) seems bizarre because it connects to designing the space where the basic concepts such as natural lighting and ventilation if implemented properly, significantly reduces the energy requirement.

When working for a project in rural Karnataka, Sneha had to introduce herself as an engineer rather than an architect as those people were not aware of what her profession meant, but she found the whole process extremely thrilling - to understand the lives of people in that context which would not normally be in architect’s clientele. She also termed the whole procedure to be exceptionally humbling. She had to work with the local masons, who probably knew things much better than she did on site, and all she held over him was just her degree. It was that participatory approach of taking people’s opinion that made her realise that sometimes we as designers are really not practical and don’t look at user inputs or actual usage of the built.

“ The moment you involve others and stop being the designer on pedestal, and start doing things on ground is when everything fits in.”

Migration – the universal concept

Migration not being a new phenomenon, there were Indian labourers being taken to Maldives, Singapore, Suriname and other places in

the past. Recently there are rural-to-rural as well as rural-to-urban migration happening, either because people want to move forward in life or due to better work opportunities. Communities move within rural areas in certain seasons, which boils down to agriculture. The migrant communities that the organisation primarily focuses on are the ones that shift to urban areas and are classified at various degrees. The first category are the people who consider the home back at the rural area as primary and shift to urban areas only to gather savings and provide better facilities back in rural home. The second category people are the ones who want to make primary living in urban area. The way these people navigate are extremely different from the first. While their issues differ, solutions offered to the first are temporary whereas the second seems to be more permanent. Next at third category comes the seasonal migrants which is immense in our country and mainly deals with the agricultural people who does farming for one quarter period and migrate to work in cities for the other quarter. There are some who also migrate for additional income only during the times of extra need (say marriage of daughter/son) in the family.

But then all these happen with a very strong social network as people don't migrate to places where they don't have any connection. They always have someone who is already working in some place with whose help they are able to get a connect to work there may it be their relative or friends whose thread is what one holds out to migrate. Working with these people is always difficult and comes in with a lot of trust because they don't accept it when randomly you tell them to change their roof to get better comfort. Pilot and demonstrations go a long way in breaking the stereotypical methods they always follow and trust is the basic key.

Gender and Migration

While labour colonies are provided for men in large development and commercial programmes, women are prone to harassment. Hence in terms of migration, women are far more vulnerable and discriminated where they can't access livelihoods as easily as men do. This also deeply comes from a cultural setting where women choose to be a support system back at home while men migrate to work in cities. It is quite integral where Sneha personally feels that families are broken, but it is their own preference and this doesn't happen only in lower sections but also middle and upper-middle class where men migrate abroad leaving their families. 'This is something not what it should be but then it is what it is', said Sneha.

Climate and Migration

The issue of climate change and migration in most cases is connected to agriculture. The recent case SELCO had to deal with was a site in Puri, year after

the cyclone Fani happened. All the coconut farms had been destroyed and the labourers didn't have any work. At that level, it was just a question of what other employment opportunities these people had. With frequent cyclones happening, this question remains unsolved.

Water table, rains, contamination, cyclones –with no proper solutions, these aspects more or less feature into any kind of programme or development the government also takes up. Odisha government looks at it very strongly because they have natural disasters hitting more frequently than any other state. One example to give from Odisha is that a couple of months back there was cyclone Yaas which was not very damaging, but one stretch around Balasore region had sea water entering into the agricultural field which means that there was an issue of saline water. After it evaporated, the fields remained full of salinity hence the whole produce of one season was completely gone. In these cases, these people don't have much savings and limited the alternative livelihood option. So, what next? What happens? This is what leads to migration.

"Since the issues to be solved are quite large, the biggest challenge that we face is to identify the issue, for which we will be able to provide solution. It is good to focus on what you can do to resolve rather than having to address everything. The other challenge would be convincing people that the solution offered is good for them. Gaining their trust is a big process and there is no one shot solution. This is where trust, conversation and demonstration to people is more favourable and simplifies the process" said Sneha.

"Being more sensitive towards the climate is the need of the hour - if not right now, don't know when we will be"

Due to covid crisis, the issue of migrated workers came to the forefront on the newspapers which made people realize that they don't even have an Aadhar or ration card with which they would be able to access all the government aids. In March 2020, there was an entire image of urban marginalized workers walking back to their villages. It was a good thing that the issue came up, but then as the year passed, people have forgotten about it and the issue has taken a back seat.

Our work is well received, mainly because people have their hearts in the right places be it the government or other NGO's. They are all working towards equality in some sense, only the tool varies. There is an effort for collaboration and to resolve the issue. In the Indian scenario, it's quite nice to see the government being active along with NGO's, working on immediate issues.

Sneha feels that it was very interesting to see lives that she otherwise wouldn't have seen and is glad that she can use her skillset as a designer and somebody who can understand construction



Before



After

Source: SELCO

to better people's life. It is the opportunity that she got to understand so many different lifestyles and culture, rather than being cocooned in the office, that made her work more enjoyable and made her better human.

"Working in this sector and understanding a lot of problems from the grass roots, looking at various aspects of projects and programmes, and facing the challenges head on is what we are focusing on now. We in SELCO are trying to reach the goal of 10,000 livelihoods which are energy efficient and can use renewable energy for their progress. Achievement for us is when large number of people are living a better life in terms of using renewable energy for energy efficiency and having the passive techniques sorted to make people's lives better" said Sneha. Everyone can make a difference and reach out to these people. One can always start within their homes where in most cases, their domestic help or cooks wouldn't hail from that city - they would have migrated from other parts of the state or other states. Understanding and being sensitive to these people would be a good start.

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Another way is to do internships or other projects that do not directly work into the field but with the setups which or off beat like the fellowships which give exposure of what it means to work with migrants or marginalized communities.

It also depends on how one can use their skill sets make things better. It is not only about us making things better, but also about us learning many things in the process and growing as a human.

"I personally feel this kind of work to be more of an eye opener for me rather than it being like I am going to change their life for the better. I am too small for that" said Sneha.

Anyone interested to take up a small internship is always more than welcome in SELCO. They can either apply on the website or write to her directly. Lot of people are coming across to understand their work and what the energy sector has to offer. Any interested and curious person can always join to make a change.