



# A home is a home

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**H**eterogeneity is expressed in every strand of life in India. Housing is one that reflects both— one’s own culture and absorption from other cultures. The richness in our architectural history grew out of local materials and local labor responding to regional climatic conditions.

With migration being the norm in our rural areas, rural homelessness needs a fresh impetus to accommodate the personal and cultural needs of the people. “Nivasa is an effort in this direction,” says Ms. Akhila Ramesh, Founder, Nivasa – a rural housing initiative.

“Rural India is home to 71 percent of the population, of which, one in every five rural dweller lives in a *kuchha* house. Schemes underway do not accommodate the cultural needs of the people, nor are they friendly to their life style. Nivasa is a venture to redefine rural landscapes through culturally sensitive, site driven and cost effective design and construction,” points out Akhila.

A corporate life after Masters in Project Management and Urban Design did not satiate Akhila. In her desire to do something meaningful, she realized that the forces that drive others (like money, corporate ladder) did not drive her. “My firm belief is equality in this mixed society. As an architect, I decided to work for 10 years and then embrace the task of giving back something meaningful to the society,” she says.

Nivasa is the product of her effort in bringing together her training in architecture and her passion for equality. “I am not a social worker, nor am I an activist. All I have is my passion,” smiles Akhila. Before recognizing where she would fit in, she spent a year researching on various options and volunteered with different organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Sandhya Kirana, and Sambhav Foundation.

Building a dry toilet in a village unveiled her inclination towards rural areas. While meeting Ashoka’s Director of Housing, in Ahmedabad, she realized that cities did not enthrall her and it was villages where she wanted to be. The final spark came when she met a veteran architect in Ahmedabad,



Mr. Kirti Shahwhe. He had told her: “It is either rural or urban, and never both.” Thus, Nivasa was born to provide professional design and construction support for rural housing and infrastructure as a design and build venture.

Akhila came to know about CSIM through her mentor, Dr Usha Vasthare, a neuroscientist, and Founder of the NGO, Yogakshema. “The course on social entrepreneurship is just the right package for individuals who wish to contribute towards change and development. The knowledge that I acquired here has brought me a long way. Networking was taught as an art in itself and it helped me in

approaching people from a wide spectrum,” elaborates Akhila.

On 19th March, 2012, Nivasa will be launching its first project in Timmaianadoddi Village, located in the outskirts of Bangalore. Nivasa is involving the community in the construction to give them an alternate source of income. Physical scaled models for various options of design are being presented to the community so that they could choose which model would suit them best. Additionally, the materials already existing are being reused— like asbestos sheets for cow sheds or toilets. “It takes about three months to build each house,” says Akhila.

Nivasa has gradually identified other needs of the people that can be addressed in the process of constructing the houses and rain water harvesting was one such concern that demanded attention. Nivasa roped in Mr. Aiyappa Masagi, an Ashoka fellow and founder of Water Literacy Foundation and proposed for rainwater harvesting in this village. NIVASA has involved Ex IISc Professor Dr. Yogananda to provide expert guidance on cost effective materials and construction techniques on optimizing construction costs without diluting the quality. A bamboo expert has been roped in to enable the basket weaving community to learn usage of bamboo in construction. The Panchayat is also supportive, and NIVASA hopes to get financial support towards toilets and labour component while constructing public infrastructure. Nivasa is extremely lucky to have corporate backing for its first project.

Nivasa’s growth has been largely influenced by the earlier travel and volunteering experiences undertaken by the founder. Nivasa was part of a vernacular study of three villages in Hubli, along with Habitat for Humanity, on their cultural usage of space. “We realized that people are keen to build their houses and are also willing to contribute towards the same,” states Akhila.

On future plans of Nivasa, she says, “Nivasa must grow on the principle that a house is meant not just to provide shelter. It is a home, giving way to improved living conditions.

“I want Nivasa to grow organically and not be driven by targets. It is always one village after another. Only then will comfort and passion go together for creating better lives for the rural people,” smiles Akhila.

With all these in place Nivasa aims at finally evolving houses at a cost of fifty thousand rupees, a tall order given the rocketing costs of materials. “I have a long way to go,” she says.

Let’s wish Nivasa the best in their mission!

—Shanmuga Priya, R.