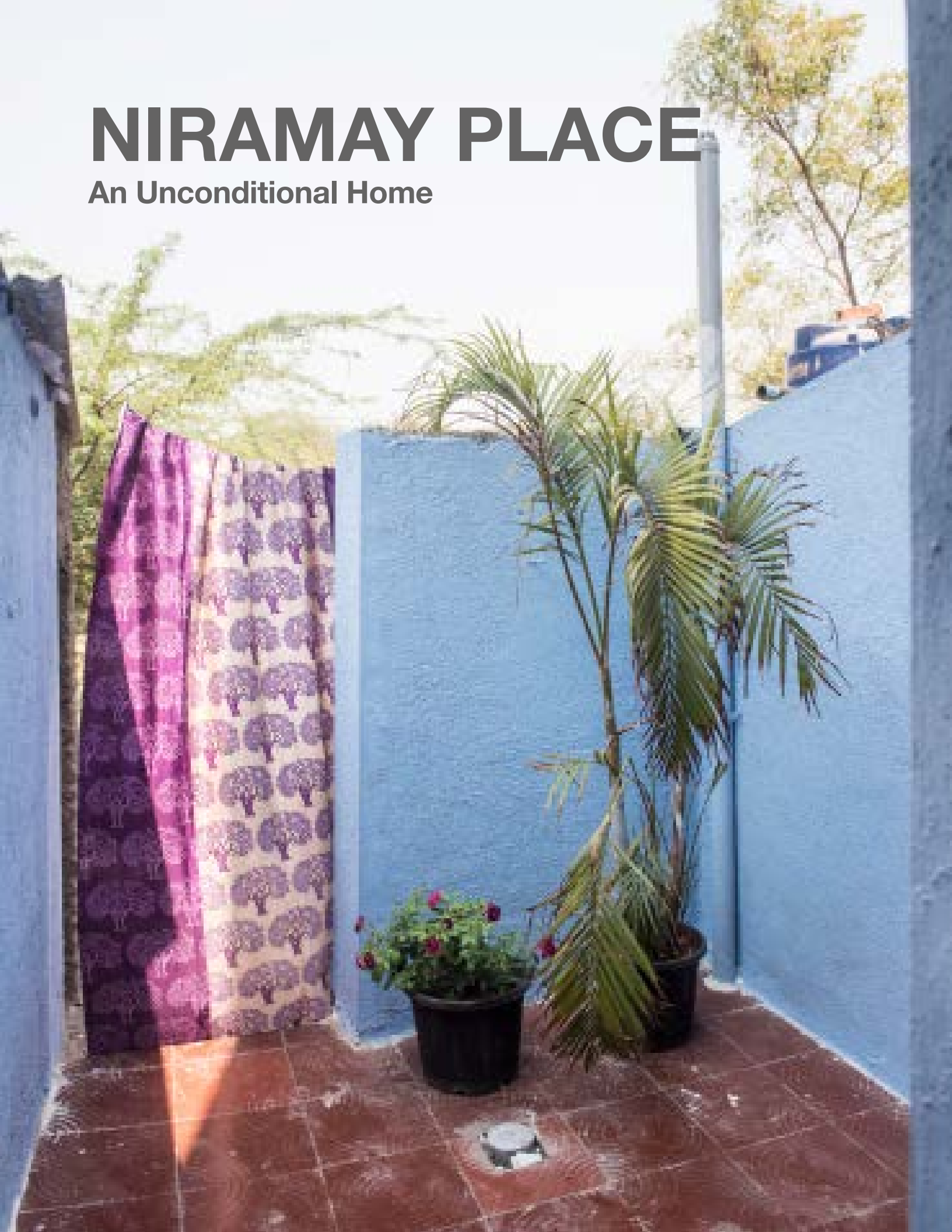


NIRAMAY PLACE

An Unconditional Home



April 2020

A Report by the
Curry Stone Design Collaborative

Niramay Project Team:

Curry Stone Design Collaborative,
Mumbai

Snehalaya, Ahmednagar

Nirvana Design Studio, Mumbai

Knot Developers, Ahmednagar

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Why We Need a Niramay Place

by Delight Stone
Founding Director,
Curry Stone Foundation



Photo - Tejal Pandey

Collaborating with exploited sex workers to create a new work space started with an instinctive “yes.” Our Foundation directors were in Mumbai, at lunch with the team from Snehalaya, an Indian non-governmental organization providing services to women, children, and LGBT communities impacted by HIV, AIDS, poverty, violence, and sex trafficking. We had just ordered our food when Snehalaya’s head, Girish Kulkarni asked, out of the blue,

“Would you like to build a home for exploited sex workers?” Everyone stopped talking. I could feel the idea traveling from person to person around the table, like the ball on a roulette wheel. When it landed on me, I blurted out, “Yes, of course.”

It was that simple. I didn’t stop to consider that building what could be termed a “brothel” might be controversial. These women deserved a safe, comfortable and practical work environment. I knew this even without doing the research we subsequently did into how dire their situation was. It was a moment to start with “yes,” then figure out the details later.

Cliff Curry and I had already witnessed first-hand the impact that good design can have on disenfranchised lives. We established the Curry Stone Foundation in 2008 with a mission to empower community-driven social impact design. The foundation’s first decade recognized

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close to 200 social design practices around the globe, provided financial and practical support. These practices were very disparate in size, scale, philosophy and constituents. Yet what became clear over the years was the most impactful practices shared one commonality: they worked closely with, if not from within, communities to collaborate on determining true needs and relevant solutions.

Armed with this insight, the Foundation provided seed funding and support for the Curry Stone Design Collaborative (CSDC), an India-based/Indian-managed architecture and design practice. In this case, the CSDC’s clients are disenfranchised female sex workers. Its architects, planners, engineers and local non-profit partners work extremely closely with these clients to design and build attractive, functional spaces that truly reflect the client’s needs, dreams and desires.

In the case of Niramay Place, the women collaborated with Sandhya, the Managing Director of the CSDC, to set the criteria, starting with design charrettes and surveys. Using chalk on the floor, the women drew their ideal working spaces: a single coat hanger, a spittoon, an escape door, running water, etc. They established their own priorities. They chose the building materials, the colors, the curtains and other furnishings, and went with Sandhya to purchase much of what was used.

In addition to the work spaces designed by sex workers, there is a top floor area for programs that help the women become less exploited in the future—again based on what the women feel would be most helpful. This programming is integral to Niramay Place. Providing agency over so many choices regarding their work environment helps the women feel more empowered in their lives overall.

Niramay Place opened on International Women’s Day. At the opening ceremonies, the women’s excitement and energy was both palpable and inspiring. Creating a project like this from inception to completion can’t help but make one believe in her own capacity. That is my belief about myself, and what I feel I saw in these women.

Will Niramay Place make a dramatic change in these women’s lives? Only time will tell. For myself, I have a secret hope in addition to all the other improvements, it might inspire one (or more!) of the women’s children to become involved in building and design. Maybe a girl will start drawing, then someone gives her praise and encouragement, so she keeps going. I believe it is the small things like this that ignite change. The instinctive “yes, let’s do it.” You have to start there, even if you don’t know what the outcome will be.



Photo -Tejal Pandey

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Sex Work and the Built Environment

by Bhawna Jaimini
Research Associate,
Curry Stone Design Collaborative



Photo - Hazel Thompson, 2010

Conversations around sex work are difficult to have. It invariably divides a room rather quickly and often the views on whether sex work should be recognised as a legal profession or not forms the basis of the discussion and disagreement. And then there is the morality of this profession that comes into question, making it difficult to consider many pressing issues sex workers face. Laws on sex work differs throughout the world. In countries like The Netherlands and New Zealand, sex work is not just legal but also regulated with licensed brothels. In some countries, like Saudi Arabia, sex work is illegal and a punishable offence. The Indian constitution legalised sex work, but deems illegal all other activities around it, like soliciting and owning a brothel.

While designing and building Niramay Place, we found it is often impossible to proceed with a conversation around sex workers without making our allegiance to either of camp clear. However, we have been firm in our resolve to not engage in the conversation around the legality of sex work but focus consistently on the conditions in which sex work happens and the impact of those conditions on women employed as sex workers. Organisations

It's not an exaggeration to call these areas ghettos where thousands are cramped in poorly ventilated and structurally unsafe buildings. Since the constitution deems running and owning brothels illegal, there has been little to no renovation or repair work in these areas.

These red-light areas are not just home to women employed in sex work but also to their children who face extreme stigma in the society. These children along with their mothers are at risk of a number of diseases like Tuberculosis (TB), Cholera and Malaria due to the deplorable state of the buildings they reside in.

working on healthcare, especially HIV prevention, have proven this can be done. A number of organisations in India started working with sex workers after the AIDS outbreak in the 1980's. The government quickly realised that sex workers were at a high risk of contracting HIV, and started extensive programs collaborating with NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) to do outreach in brothels in cities, towns and villages with information and health kits for preventing HIV.

The impact of healthcare organisation in the last few decades has been tremendous and far reaching. Even in remote towns and villages, most of the women employed in sex work are informed about HIV and other STDs. However, this impact is only limited to sexual health and diseases. Women living in brothels are susceptible to a number of diseases owing to the dingy and deplorable conditions of their built environment. Most of the brothels are situated in what is known as 'red-light area' in a city. Some of India's famous red light areas are G.B Road in Delhi, Kamathipura in Mumbai and Sonagachi in Kolkata. It's not an exaggeration to call these areas ghettos where thousands are cramped in poorly ventilated and structurally unsafe buildings. Since the constitution deems running and owning brothels illegal, there has been little to no renovation or repair work in these areas.

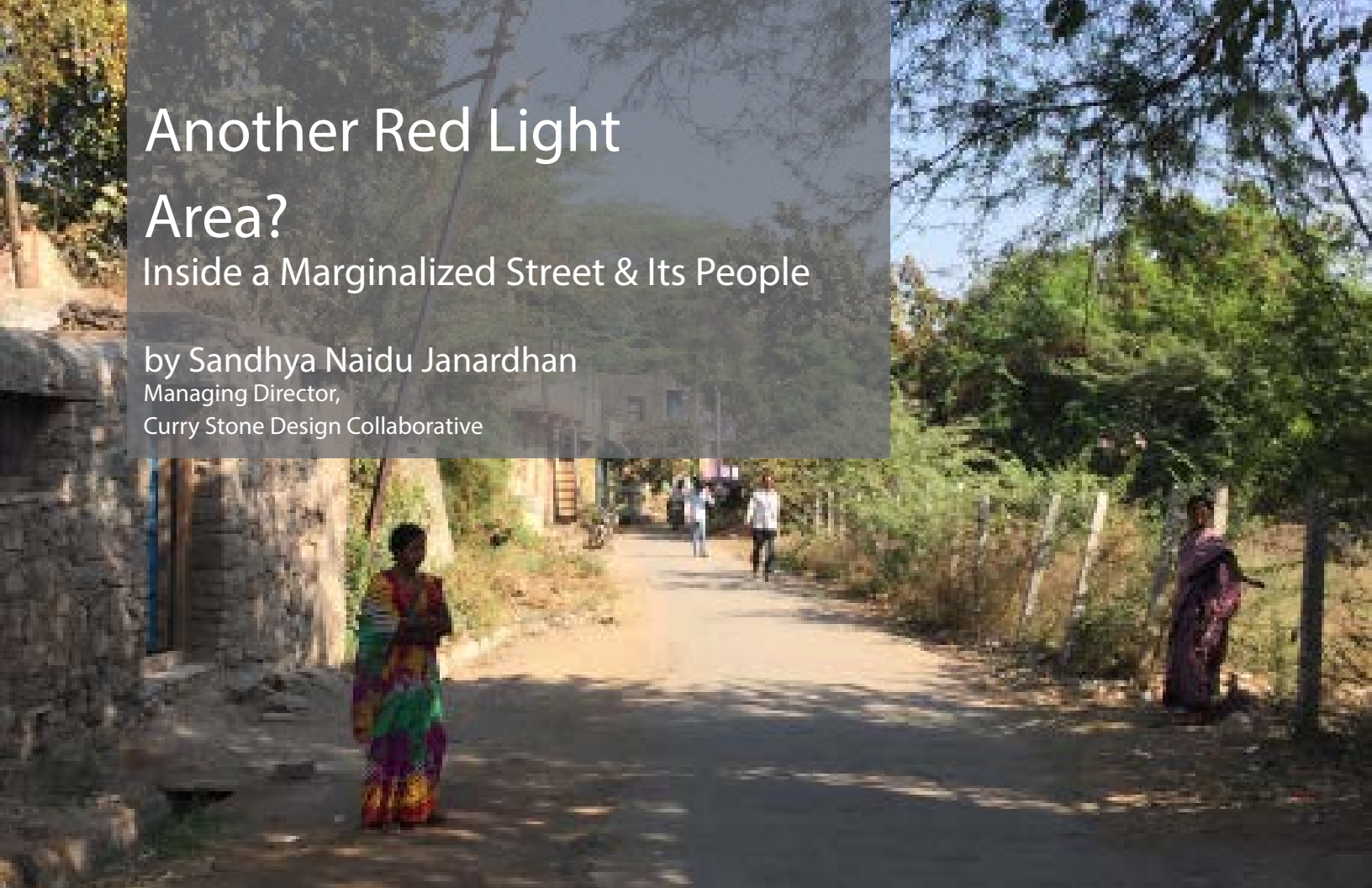
These red-light areas are not just home to women employed in sex work but also to their children who face extreme stigma in the society. These children along with their mothers are at risk of a number of diseases like Tuberculosis (TB), Cholera and Malaria due to the deplorable state of the buildings they reside in. As the debate on legalising sex work continues, more and more women and children are being denied the right to live with dignity which was upheld by the Supreme Court of India in 2011, as a constitutional right "creating conditions conducive for sex workers to work with dignity".

To ensure the health and safety of thousands of women and children living in hundreds of red light areas across the country, it is imperative that their built environment be closely examined and improved; that we began to look at the women not just as sex workers but as human beings who deserve a clean, safe, and hygienic place to live and work.

Another Red Light Area?

Inside a Marginalized Street & Its People

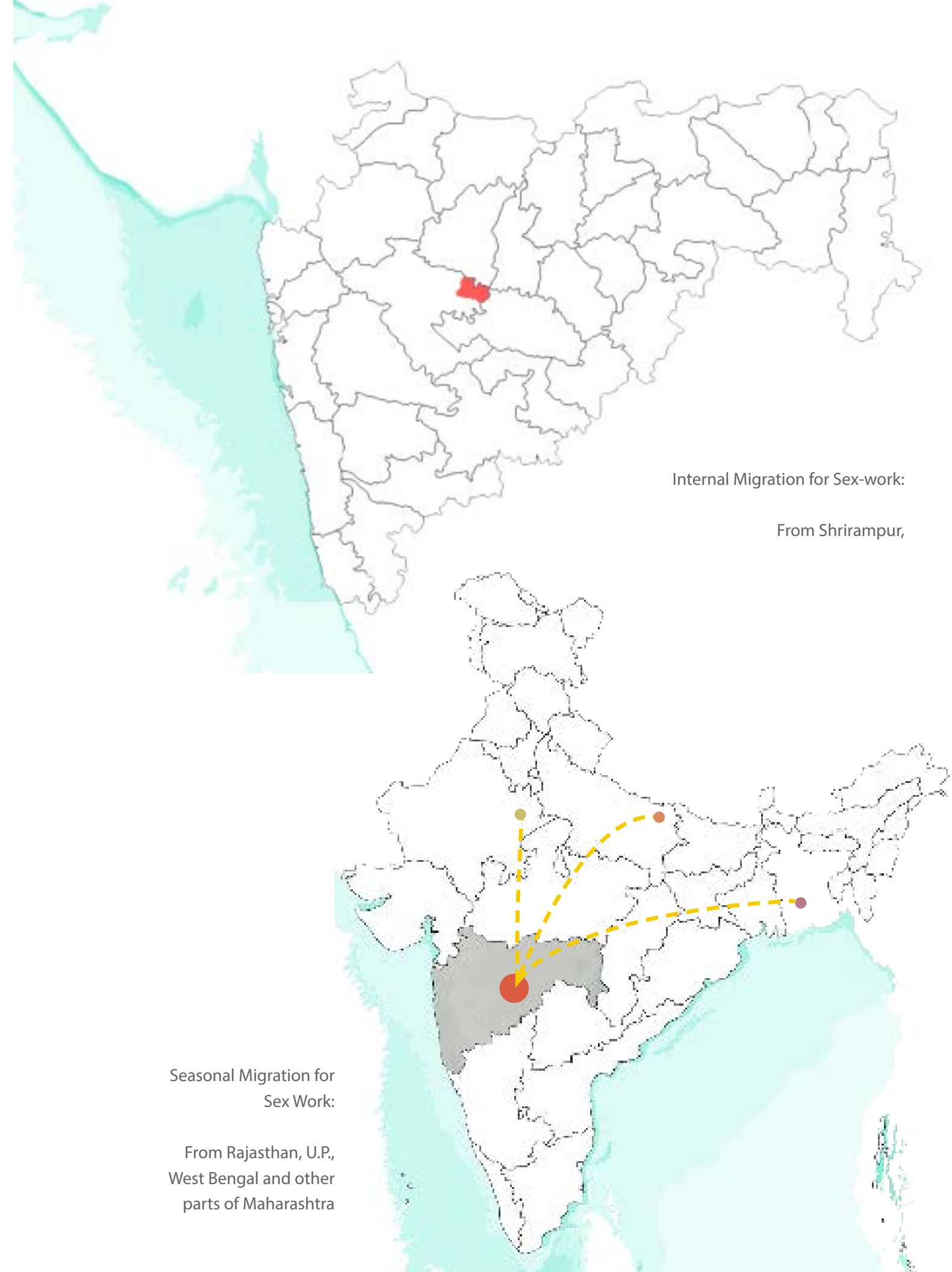
by Sandhya Naidu Janardhan
Managing Director,
Curry Stone Design Collaborative



How does one go about designing a space for sex workers—designing and building without taking a moral stance on the profession, whether for or against it? Much of what is written, discussed, filmed, and photographed is around the social, moral, and political implications of this industry. How do you consider any or all of these issues and be able to engage with sex workers as clients and community partners for a design project?

There is immense focus on health and livelihoods of sex workers in India, as there should be, but there is a lack of attention paid to the living and working conditions of these women. It is proven that a built environment impacts the health of the users of the space. However, given the moral dilemma that is attached to this type of livelihood, and the illegality around it, it is challenging to give any positive consideration to the type of place—rooms, homes, or shanties—these women use to operate their business.

In most cases, their children also grow up in these places of work. It is within these constraints that the team from Curry Stone Design Collaborative and Snehalaya strategised how to take this project forward, making the case for a safe and healthy place for sex workers in a town called Shevgaon. This brothel area used to be on the edge of a small town serving as a hub for nearly 100 villages. But over time, Shevgaon developed into a larger town and



this neighbourhood where sex workers operate has become an integral part of the urban area. Proximity to the main bus terminal has also made this neighbourhood attractive for new real estate development. The women operate out of these brothels from 9am - 5pm and then go back to their homes in the evening. This set up was negotiated in order to avoid getting caught up in police raids at night.

My account of my first visit to the brothel in Shegaon: “I was preparing for my first visit to the project site, which also happened to be my first visit to a brothel. I looked for reading materials and references on the issues of sex work so as to be well prepared. I called Girish Kulkarni to get his recommendations and I will always remember what he said. “Sandhya, there is a lot of research and literature on the state of sex work in India and there is much to read, but I want you to go there as a designer who understands space and engage with the women to understand how they live and work within their homes and brothels.”

This advice served me well, as it would have been very easy to get wrapped up on all the other challenges that come with engaging with these women who are employed in one of the most exploitative work in our society. It was important to stay focused on the issues of space and how it impacted the women.



Photo - CSDC

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Photos - CSDC





Photo - CSDC

Chalk, Water, Thread

Conceptualizing Niramay Place

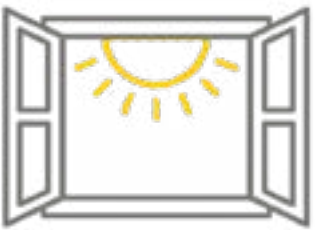
by Sandhya Naidu Janardhan
Managing Director
Curry Stone Design Collaborative

The first visit was memorable. The women, while cautious, were incredibly warm and welcoming. There was some hesitation to show their places of work but eventually, over a number of visits they did open up. The idea that they deserved a clean and healthy place of work was an alien one. We set out to simplify this idea by asking them a set of questions related to the physical space they operate in, and this proved effective. It was easy to list the facilities they needed to carry out their business effectively. Through this list we introduced other basic necessities such as natural light and ventilation, which may seem to be fundamental to any space, but having operated on the fringes of society and in dilapidated, dark corners of neighbourhoods, it didn't seem like an obvious thing that they would consider.

Once the needs were somewhat established, we set out to design the space with the women. And as one goes about planning for these design workshops, markers, paper, blocks and other items were organised to carry out the design exercise. We hit a roadblock. What was there to discuss? We just needed to build a room. Getting through to the women proved to be a challenge. Their hesitation to engage with these materials was because most of these women hadn't held a pen in their lives and they were not comfortable with markers and paper. However, they had all at some point made rangolis. (Rangoli is an art form, originating in the

The idea that they deserved a clean and healthy place of work was an alien one. We set out to simplify this idea by asking them a set of questions related to the physical space that they operate out of, and this proved effective.

What makes for a healthy place of work?



Access to Natural Daylight and Ventilation

88.5% Sex Workers report having access to windows;

But, the room gets dark and stuffy while servicing customers as they have close windows then.



Access to Waste-bins

61.5% Sex Workers report having access to waste-bins;

Used condoms are burnt in the area next to the open drain behind the brothels.

Access to Plants

53.8% Sex Workers requested for plants in their common areas;

What they asked for work?





Interestingly, what emerged was not just the access to water and sanitation facilities that they had asked for in the initial survey, but art and plants were introduced into the design as well.



Photos - CSDC



Indian subcontinent, in which patterns are created on the floor or the ground in front of homes with rice flour or chalk.) Using rangoli, this originated the idea of using chalk, water, and thread to imagine the designs with the women on what their places of work could be—one that offers a safe and healthy environment and potentially offer some dignity,

Interestingly, what emerged was not just the access to water and sanitation facilities that they had asked for in the initial survey, but art and plants were introduced into the design as well. Each of the groups in the workshop then presented their ideas with design walkthroughs, which was fun for everyone. We took these ideas and composed them into easily understandable collages and sketches for the women to pass around and take a closer look. It was during these discussions that the women were able to see more potential in the space that was being developed and come up with the idea of adding a community space on the first floor for small gatherings.

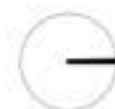
Getting these women to care about the quality of their workplace demonstrated to us how truly empowered they were and what really lacked was the opportunity to have a say in how they lived or worked. Many women participated during the construction phase as quite a few had in fact built houses for their families back home. Most of the design details and finishes were discussed with them and implemented on site to build a home just as they would for their own families.

The space was inaugurated on Women's Day in March 2018, a fitting celebration for a unique space created with the sex workers of Shevgaon. Seeing their genuinely happy faces and hearing their feedback, was proof of the value of really listening to them and giving them an opportunity to create something everyone could be proud of.

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OPTION-R8-GROUND FLOOR ARCHITECTURAL PLAN



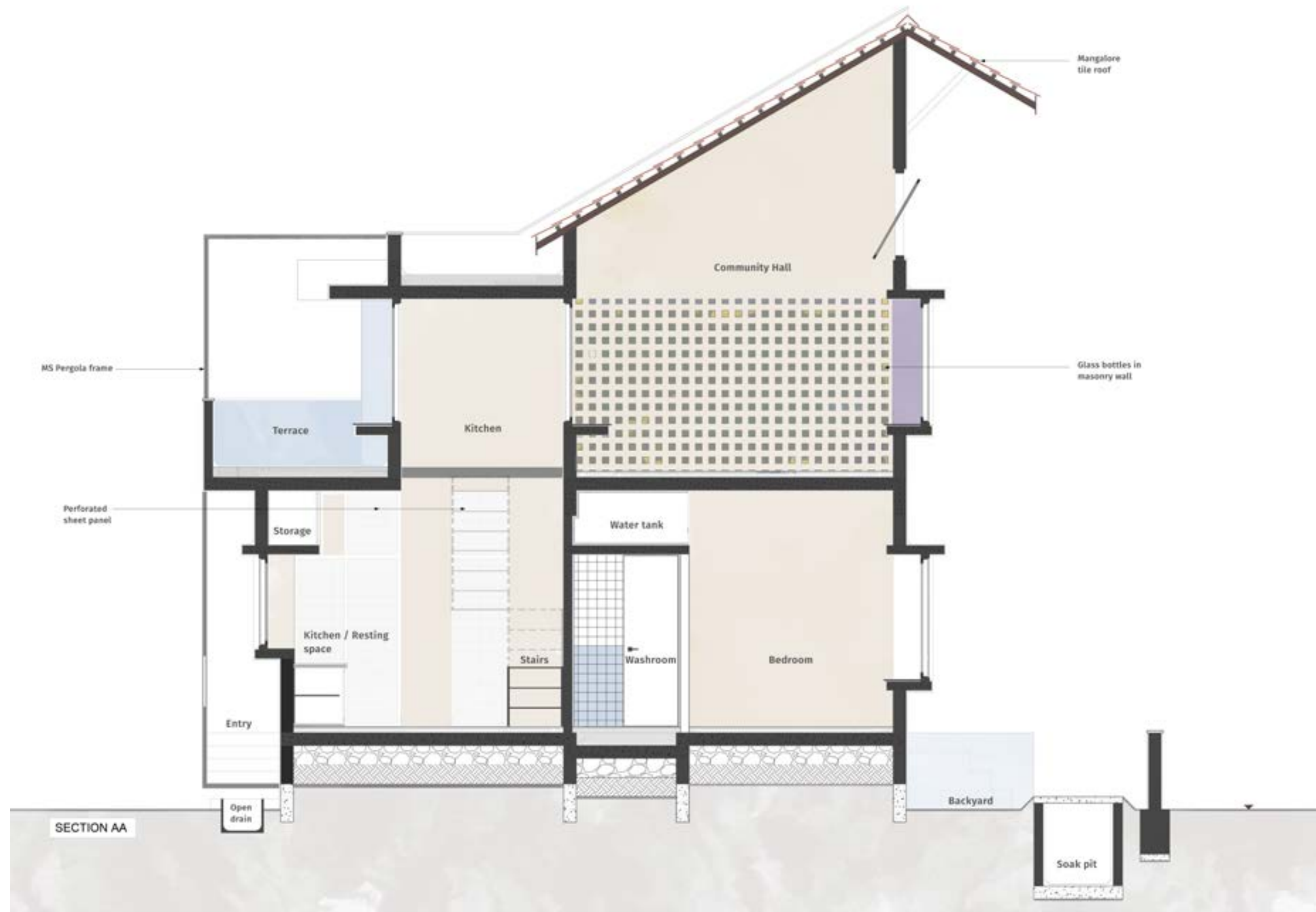




Photo - Prachi Metawala

Photo - Tejal Pandey





Photo - Tejal Pandey

After Niramay

by Bhawna Jaimini
Research Associate,
Curry Stone Design Collaborative



Photo - Prachi Metawala



Photo - Prachi Metawala



When we first visited Shevgaon, before Niramay place came into being, the women were hesitant to let us into their place of work. Understandably so, as we urban women knew nothing of their lives and work. During the course of our engagement with them, over several meetings of sharing biryani, chai, and secrets, the women began allowing us into their homes. For almost a year after Niramay Place was built, we would go and meet the women either outside their workplace as they waited for their customers, or inside the walls of Niramay Place. Every time we went, we would carefully plan conversations around their routine, trying our best not to get in the way of their work.

A few months ago, we casually asked one of the women if she would let us see the inside of her workplace. We weren't sure how she would react and were ready to be turned down. However, the woman turned on her heels, took us by our hands and led us inside. Though structurally the place was in shambles, she had taken measures to keep it clean and hygienic. This was in stark contrast with what we had seen during our first visit to Shevgaon. Other women also gathered and started taking us to their workplaces, and showed us every nook and corner: the place where they keep soap and water, the arrangements to dispose of condoms. They told us they clean their place everyday.

The idea behind Niramay Place was to instill that no human being deserves to work in deplorable conditions, and it takes just one building to change the outlook of an entire community of women towards themselves and their workplaces.

Sex work is deemed as 'dirty work'. Often how we talk of their profession physically manifests itself into their workplaces. The idea behind Niramay Place was to instill that no human being deserves to work in deplorable conditions, and it takes just one building to change the outlook of an entire community of women towards themselves and their workplaces.



Photos - Prachi Metawala



Photo - Prachi Metawala



Need for Safe and Healthy Spaces for Sex-workers

By Girish Kulkarni

Founder, Snehalaya

Sex work is a taboo in India. Religious, cultural and social values outcasts the profession of prostitution. As most of the sex-workers belong to socially and economic backward castes and communities, they have to face another layer of social extrusion and hatred from the society.

During the British rule, sex-work was encouraged to satisfy the needs the soldiers who left the families behind. Hence most of the red light areas developed near army, navy and air force establishments. After independence, the Parliament of India passed the Suppression of Immoral trafficking Act in 1956. This act banned the brothels forcibly using the women, minors, pimping, brokering of women for sex-work.

In a country like India, the social customs are always more influential than progressive laws. Even today we observe child marriages, female foeticide or forcing girls into sex-work as a ritual in some caste and tribes despite laws and regulations against such practices.

Indian society is a male dominated one and a large section treats the women as a commodity. As we move towards a more urbanised and consumeristic world which has increased the social and economic inequality - organised crime gangs find trafficking a lucrative business. And since running a brothel is a crime, women and girls are sent to clients at hotels, lodges and other private places, leaving women in a highly vulnerable position.

According to the NGOs working in this sector, there are about 60 lakh women and girls in brothels who are forced into sex work all over India. They are exploited and ill-treated by brothel keepers, customers, police department etc... The Indian society treats all these women of flesh trade as criminals rather than victims. The law enforcement machinery always books the prostitutes in brothels for different police acts in all states of India. Most of the time they are charged for soliciting at public places but the irony is that brothel keeping, pimping and procuring the women and girls for flesh trade

are neglected though they are serious non bail-able offenses. It happens because of the nexus between the police, brothel keepers and organized gangs involved in the trafficking racket.

As an NGO working in one of the districts in India, Snehalaya knows its limitations. We cannot remove the whole darkness but can light a small lamp for bringing a ray of hope. This is the motivation behind creating the 'Niramay project' in Shevgaon in collaboration with Curry Stone Foundation. Snehalaya is working for women in prostitution and LGBT group since last 3 decades in Ahmednagar. Shivnagar area in Shevagaon has the largest number of women in prostitution. As usual all the women, staying in different brothels are facing physical and psychological trauma because of the structure and nature of the brothels. There are several small rooms with no space for ventilation and sunlight. There are no windows and the roof is made of tin. The inadequate height of 8 feet from the ground and the tin roof makes every brothel room resemble a hot furnace in the summer. No basin, no bathrooms, no place to wash & dry their clothes and no water facilities in the room make it completely unhygienic and a breeding ground for life threatening infections. Usually brothels have a zero bulb or prefer complete darkness which causes several problems including psychological negative impacts. This environment of the brothel is more harmful to children than the women who are using the same facilities.

Snehalaya was always thinking of measures to transform the lives of victims of flesh trade into the dignified citizens. We know it's a long way and so we started thinking of the ways to at least minimize the miseries in the lives of women in sex-work. It will be a slow process to give or to create a home with all basic amenities for the women in brothels but we thought that it is easier and possible to bring a change in attitude with some changes in the brothels. If the brothels have window, ventilation, light, sanitation, washrooms, basin, water facility, then it will add human flavor in the lives in brothels. The big question was who will appreciate, encourage, financially and technically support such an innovative concept. We thought of converting one brothel into a model brothel. The Curry Stone Foundation gave an immediate positive response to us for implementing this idea. We have formed a task force of the representatives of Snehalaya and Curry Stone foundation to complete the mission. Shevgaon, a small town in Ahmednagar district has now got a global identity as it has the first ideal brothel in India. Stay in this brothel home brought smiles on the faces of women. I know it's just the beginning of a change but then every beginning is small like this one. It is bringing the change in the attitude of the women in the flesh trade. Now they are expecting light, air, water, sanitation and other basic facilities like Shevgaon. This change will keep them free from opportunistic infections, sexual abuse and violence thus assuring a healthy future for them.

This may be looked at by some critics as a means to encourage prostitution but Snehalaya thinks just the opposite. We feel that till there are lakhs of women in this vicious cycle of sex-work we need to provide them basic humanitarian amenities. The initiation, finding the right place, convincing the sex-work, planning and implementation, finding the right architects, and funding the project was a very ambitious and difficult task. This unique project has only been possible and completed due to The Curry Stone Foundation and the dedicated efforts of their complete team.

In a country like India, the social customs are always more influential than the progressive laws. Even today, we experience it; when we observe child marriages, female foeticide or forcing girls into prostitution as a ritual in some caste and tribes.



Current Socio-economic Status of Sex-workers

by Bhawna Jaimini
Research Associate,
Curry Stone Design Collaborative

There are about 42 women working in the red light area of Shevgaon. According to Pravin Mutyal, a social worker from Snehalaya who has worked with the women on issues of healthcare for the past two decades. There used to be more than 400 women working on the street. However, frequent raids by the police which also led to arrests of many women, impacted the trade severely. Many women fled the street to go to other red light areas in neighbouring towns and cities, and some even went back to their villages. Women working from the street are from Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar, and Rajasthan. Women from outside of Maharashtra are not in Shevgaon throughout the year and keep going back to their villages every few months.

We spoke to about 15 women in the colony and all them had entered sex work by their own will. However, one could not ignore the commonality between the circumstances that got them there. They had endured extreme hardships in their lives before becoming a sex worker, and some of them still continue to struggle. Most of them have little or no education, and were abandoned by their husbands or were abandoned by their in-laws after their husbands died. Some of them even worked in other professions, but came back to sex work eventually. Though there is shame and stigma in being a sex worker, the women feel proud about being able to support their families back home.

Soni, a twenty-two year old girl from Maharashtra who now works in Shevgaon finished high school. Before entering sex work, she used to work in a factory where she earned 9000 rupees a month. As a sole bread earner of her family of five, she decided to become a sex worker. Soni claims to earn between 500-1500 per day that amounts to an average of 30,000 rupees a month. She has been able to support her brother by financing an auto-rickshaw through her earnings. Khushi, another twenty something woman from West Bengal, comes to Shevgaon for 6-8 months every year. She recently helped her family purchase a tractor to help with the farming. Since most of these women do not have education, earning opportuni-

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ties for them are extremely limited. “The only option we have is to work as domestic workers and we can’t support our families on the wages of a domestic worker,” Khushi once remarked during one of our conversations. Suman, a middle aged woman with two teenage sons studying in college has been able to buy land and build a house for herself and her family. Suman also used to be a community organiser with Snehalya and helped in implementing various health programs in the red light area. She plans to work for a couple more years and then retire.

With each passing day, women are facing more and more challenges. Police raids are frequent and there was recently a case registered by nearby residents that questioned the ownership of the land occupied by the women. In the wake of these challenges, women are opting out of brothel-based sex work and are moving to ‘on-call’ work in either hotels or other places owned by their clients. This makes the women extremely vulnerable. Middle-aged women are dropping out of sex work but have no alternative livelihoods, due to lack of skills and opportunities. We initiated multiple discussions and conducted a few workshops with the women on exploring alternative livelihood options and other external challenges, like raids. With dwindling numbers of women on ground, it was difficult for conversations to lead to an implementable plan.

Challenges of Socio-Economic Empowerment of Sex Workers in Shevgaon

Stigma and shame attached to sex work

Most of the sex workers live dual lives due to extreme shame and stigma attached to their job. This is especially true for migrant women who come from different parts of India. They send money back home but are never able to share with their families, the challenges and difficulties of being a sex worker.

Lack of steady income & Non-availability of Credit Options

Sex work is a highly unorganised and informal sector with multiple players. Most of the sex workers never get to be a part of the formal banking system and therefore can never access credit facilities. Most of them are dependent on their pimps, madams, and other loan sharks who give loans at very high interest rates. Many sex workers get trapped by brothel owners for years on end as they are unable to repay their loans.

With each passing day, women are facing more and more challenges. Police raids are frequent and there was recently a case registered by the nearby residents that questioned the ownership of the land occupied by the women.





Photo - Prachi Metawala

Literacy Program

The idea of Nirmay Place grew from providing a safe, clean and healthy environment for women in sex work into a community space for women to sit, chat, and share their stories. The sight of women huddled together and talking while they wait for their customers is fairly common. The waiting period is also for bonding and sharing stories. However, with the fear of raids, flow of customers and other responsibilities, the women hardly get any time for themselves, neither for leisure nor for personal development.

The upper floor of Nirmay Place was designed to give these women a space to be themselves and come together without the fear of authorities or the anticipation of customers. But it was difficult to explain the idea of having time and space to themselves to women who have been working all their lives to support their families. After various discussions with the women on how they would want to use the space, many of them expressed their concerns over low literacy rates and their wish to educate themselves.

For the first few weeks, very few women came to attend the classes but the numbers grew slowly and steadily until almost 15 women gathered twice a week for a few hours to study with Lata.

A few weeks after Nirmay Place was inaugurated, literacy classes were started. There was a lot of hesitation among people to come to a red light area to teach these women. However, Lata, a local teacher, came forward to run classes twice a week. For the first few weeks, very few women came to attend the classes but the numbers grew slowly and steadily until almost 15 women gathered twice a week for a few hours to study with Lata. They looked forward to those days when they can safely become students without the baggage of being sex workers. It was interesting to note that a few women who came to the classes were already educated and had passed their high school exam. They looked at the literacy classes as a time to bond with other women, and also help them in their lessons.

It has been more than a year since the classes began. Many women are learning basic reading and writing skills. However there remains a need for a curriculum that is designed for these women. Existing adult literacy programs need to be adapted for sex workers in Shevgaon.

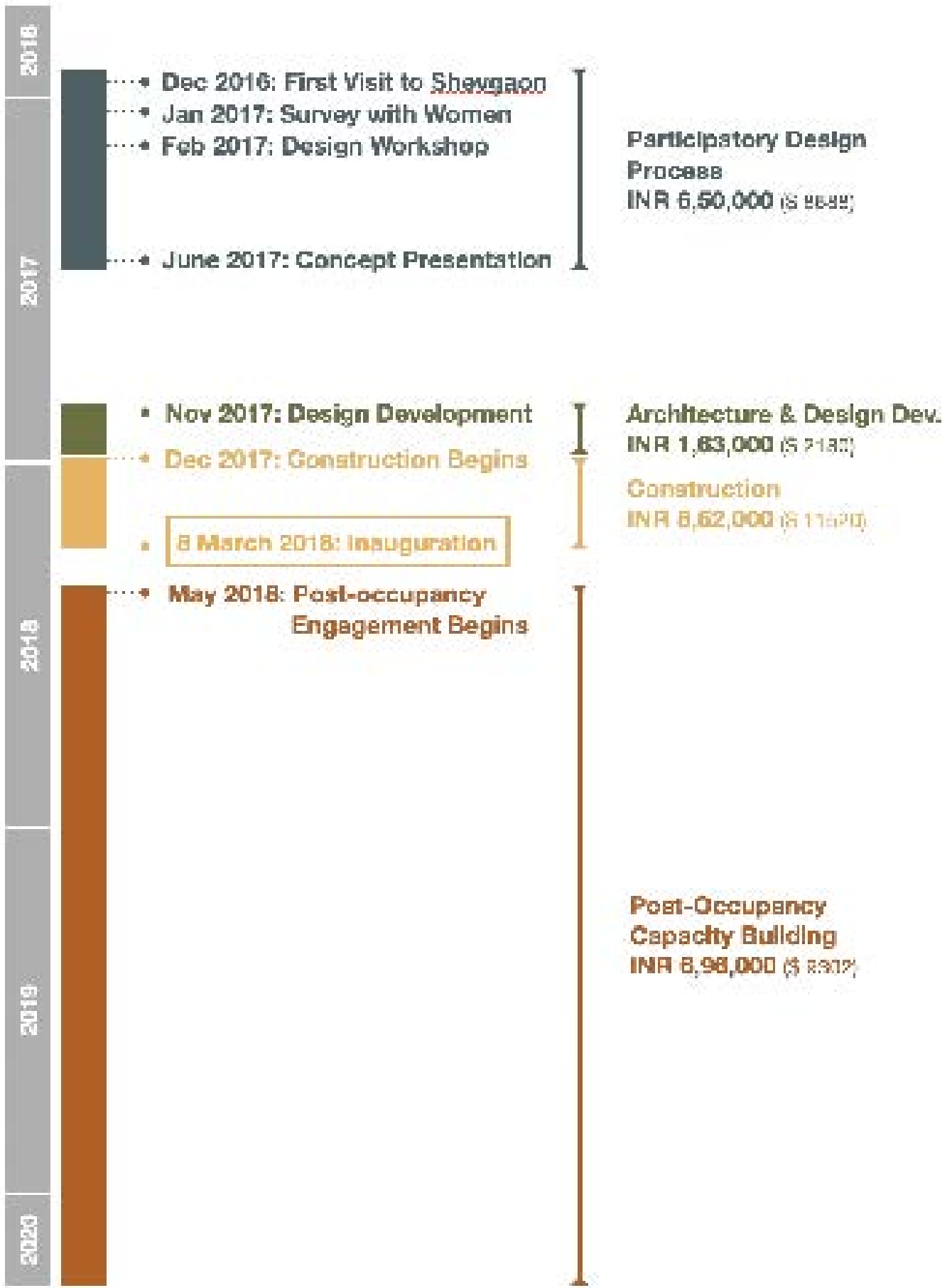
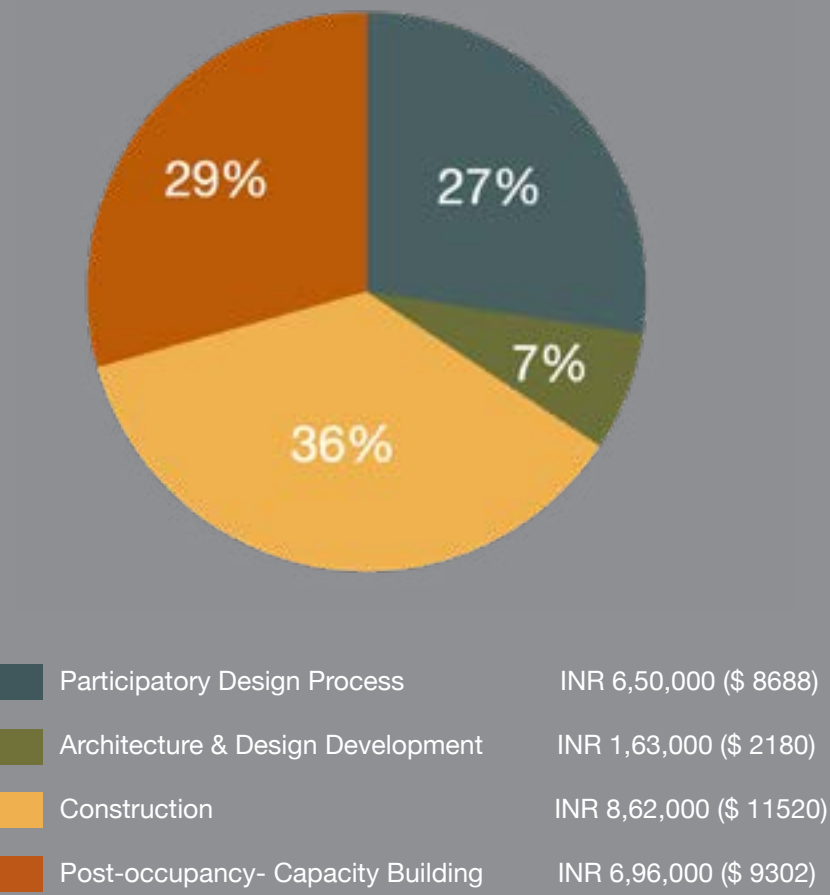
Photo - Prachi Metawala



Budget

Building consensus and consulting with the women of Shevgaon was key to the implementation of Niramay. The initial scope of this project was to explore the idea of a safe and healthy space of work for sex-workers. However through the participatory process what evolved was a space that not only addressed the working condition of the women, but an addition of a small community space on the upper floor. This proved to be a good demonstration of the value of participatory design, that not only had the women look at an aspect of their work place in new light, but brought with it the hope that there may be possibilities of a different kind of livelihood should they choose to leave their current profession.

Given the very idea of a space like Niramay was a new one, continued engagement through various interventions was necessary. It was important to look beyond the built space itself and to engage with the sex workers post construction. For over a year, the first floor became a space for bringing new ideas and conversations to these women.



Way Forward

by Sandhya Naidu Janardhan

Managing Director

Curry Stone Design Collaborative



Photo - Prachi Metawala

It has now been 3 years since Niramay Place was built. As the conclusion for this report is being written, the world is in the midst of battling Covid-19. India decided to take some drastic measures in curtailing the spread of the disease by initiating a complete lock down. A large section of the population is now struggling. The poor and daily wage earners are now reduced to depending on food packets that are being distributed. Not everyone has been fortunate enough to get access to even these meagre meals. To make matters worse, a large section of the urban population is in a lockdown in small cramped spaces without adequate light and ventilation. Amongst the worst affected are the women employed in the sex work industry. With the existing challenges of stigma and shame attached to their work, they've received little to no help in fighting the pandemic.

There have been reports of thousands of sex workers and their children stranded in brothel areas, cooped up in small dingy spaces when they couldn't make their way to their hometowns in time. Many are struggling for two meals a day. The appalling physical conditions of the built environment make for a perfect setting to spread diseases. These vulnerable women and children are in danger and pose a risk to public health. There is an increasing amount of research and data directly linking the built environment to the inhabitants' health. With the current challenge the world is facing, it is clear there is an urgent need to address the inequities in the built environment.

Amongst the worst affected are the women employed in the sex work industry. With the existing challenges of stigma and shame attached to their work, these have been receiving little to no help in these times.

This space may or may not survive in its present form, but we hope that it inspires sex workers and the people working with sex workers to take the issues of built environment seriously.

The circumstances of the women in the red-light district of Shevgaon have rapidly changed since 2016. With constant and multiple raids and harassment from the police, an increasing number of women are choosing to stop working from the red-light street and moving to online requests and home-based sex work. They attend to customers in hotels and lodges at great risk to their safety. This trend is catching among sex workers all over India. Girish Kulkarni has raised several concerns about this shift in the profession. "The (red-light area) is not just a place of work for them. These women support each other in times of distress and make sure the customers don't cheat or exploit them. As an organisation working on their healthcare, it was easier for us to disseminate information on HIV and other diseases. Now it is becoming increasingly difficult to gather them. They are also at a higher risk of being abused by their customers."

At Niramay Place we worked with the women on a number of issues like alternative livelihoods, personal hygiene, and literacy. We have seen first-hand the transformation in how the women chose to engage in the design process, in taking pride and ownership of their space. They've demonstrated that they care when given a chance. The first-floor community space of Niramay Place where we hosted a number of gatherings with the women, doubles as a classroom twice a week for adult literacy lessons. It's been more than a year since the classes began. However, due to constant raids by the police, these classes were discontinued a number of times. More and more women are leaving the streets with each passing month, but we have decided to continue supporting the literacy program even if only two women show up.

Khushi, the woman who made her workplace out of the room on the ground floor of Niramay Place left for her native village. She said she would come back soon, though she had an unsure look on her face. Khushi had operated out of this red-light area for 5 years and had built a social network that she could depend on. She shared with us how she preferred to operate out of this small town compared to going to a red-light district in a large city. Khushi felt a sense of security in this small town. This doesn't mean her experiences were devoid of challenges in Shevgaon, or that she doesn't have other options to help her continue supporting her family. She might have to resort to either online or home-based sex work, putting herself at great risk. The alternatives that Khushi is faced with are fraught with challenges.

Jayatai, a former sex worker and permanent resident of the street, thinks that the police will continue to crack down and it will become increasingly difficult to operate from there. What will become of Niramay Place if all the women leave the street? This is a question we have grappled with. Through Niramay Place, we tried initiating multiple conversations and processes around alternative livelihoods, safety, and hygiene, built environment and

education. Increasing raids which lead to fluctuating numbers of women on the ground have prevented these conversations from turning into tangible outcomes. But we firmly believe that by being an enabler of these conversations around sex workers and their built environment, Niramay Place has managed to serve its purpose within the constraints it had to deal with.

Niramay Place was initiated as a way to bring health and hygiene and dignity to the lives of the women in sex work. This space may or may not survive in its present form, but we hope that it inspires sex workers and the people working with sex workers to take the issues of built environment seriously. In trying to initiate a dialogue about the need for improved living conditions for these women, the moral and legal debate of sex work tends to take centre stage. Collaborators on this project have different opinions about this issue, but as architects and designers we believe in dignity for all human beings. The right to a safe, healthy, and clean environment should extend to all. This core value has been at the heart of this project and has truly guided us in creating a space that brought respite to the sex workers, however fleeting these moments may have been.

Photo - Prachi Metawala



