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IT'S NOT WHERE — IT'S HOW



Uttar Pradesh Model of Corona Management

Corona curfew: The sense of protection of life and livelihood

The fight against the corona epidemic continues across the country. While the rest of states took recourse to the policy of complete lockdown in their bid to contain the spread of coronavirus, Uttar Pradesh implemented the policy of corona curfew.

With the spirit of protecting and preserving both life and livelihood at the core of this innovative system, essential activities like medical as well as industrial units, sugar mills, cold storages, grocery shops, agricultural and construction work, fruit and vegetable shops, fertilizer & seed shops, wheat procurement centres continued to operate in the state.

In fact, a record was made in wheat procurement during the corona curfew. In this period, there was no restriction on the movement of people for essential work, an e-pass facility was provided for special

We are committed to saving the lives and livelihood of our citizens. We are regularly marching forward in the direction of defeating Corona virus with our dedicated, unidirectional service-oriented approach. I hereby commend all health workers and Corona warriors associated with this mission.

**— Yogi Adityanath,
Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh**

circumstances. The State Transport Corporation buses also continued to ply within the state, so that citizens did not have to face any problem in commuting. Even though there was no total lockdown, UP registered the best recovery rate in the country and also ranked among the states with the lowest positivity rate.

Experts earlier feared that UP would be having a minimum of one lakh positive cases every day in May, and by the end of the month, there would be more than 17 lakh active cases in the state. However, the scenario turned out to be quite the opposite. The corona situation in UP remains better than the situation in states with half or one-third of its population like Delhi, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan, etc.

The state is also ready to face the challenge of a possible third wave and the new Delta Plus variant. The state government believes and professes that the Corona wave is under control but not decimated. That is why the preparations are still on to improve facilities at all PHC, CHCs and larger medical centres in the state.

Aggressive Testing: Record Testing of more than 5.81 crore people

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has emphasised on aggressive testing since the first wave of Corona.

Whether it is the establishment of new laboratories or the need to equip them all with necessary facilities, he has always accorded top priority to it. Last year, Uttar Pradesh had to send the sample of the first case of Covid-19 for testing to the National Institute of Virology (Pune).

On March 23, 2020, only 72 tests were done at KGMU's lab. But soon all steps to create resources were taken up on war footing and in no time Uttar Pradesh emerged as the state conducting maximum number of Covid tests. This also became the core of Yogi Adityanath government's 3T-strategy of 'Trace, Test and Treat' that helped contain the pandemic outbreak in the state. At present, the state has more than 300 testing laboratories and the health department has been almost every day breaking its own record of conducting maximum tests in a day. As on June 30, Uttar Pradesh had conducted a total of 5,81,11,746 tests. This number of covid tests is highest among all Indian states and Union Territories. Tests conducted on June 30 were 2,67,658.

WHO lauds door-to-door screening and testing in the villages



The World Health Organization (WHO) has praised the UP government for its move to protect villages from the deadly pandemic. While launching a special campaign to kick-start its implementation, the Chief Minister had stressed that a massive testing campaign should be conducted in all the 97,000 revenue villages of the state. This massive testing campaign got underway on



May 5 under which four lakh members of 73,000 monitoring committees went door-to-door in the villages to screen people. If any symptomatic or suspicious person was found, the rapid response team was immediately contacted to get the testing done.

Under this campaign, facility for home isolation and institutional quarantine of the patients was provided as per the need. Medical kits were also provided to the patient and his family members. A review of the campaign was conducted after May 9, where it was found out that 68 per cent of the villages were free from any infection. The campaign has since continued, and its report has been useful in chalking out the future strategy.

UP has done a commendable job with regard to tracing and surveillance. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath says that constant contact tracing and surveillance is the most important aspect in breaking the chain of coronavirus. During the pandemic, the Chief minister has been personally assessing the district-wise reports of contact tracing on a day-to-day basis.

Better Consultation facilities

During the pandemic affected period, people in the state have also availed of facilities like helpline, tele-

Elderline No.-14567

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medicine, and e-consultation. The state was ranked second in the country in taking medical advice through the E-Sanjeevani app of the health department. A dedicated phone line was given to this service at all Integrated Command and Control Centres in the state.

No dearth of Oxygen

Henceforth, Uttar Pradesh will never face unavailability of oxygen for patients, a situation caused by sudden onset of second wave of Covid. The state has now approved 528 oxygen plant and 121 of those are now functional. When there was sudden rise in the demand for medical oxygen in April this year, the state had only 25 working plants. However, in near future it will be having 528 functional plants.

121 Oxygen Plants now functional out of 528 sanctioned

Early Treatment-Early Recovery



While interacting with different sections of society during the corona period, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath always appealed to the people not to hide the disease. Reiterating that Covid-19 is not a disease but an pandemic, he told them that the sooner they got the treatment, the faster they could recover. With this spirit, quality treatment was provided to all the corona patients in a convenient manner. It underlined the determination in the war against coronavirus of state, which had no arrangement for the treatment when the first case was detected last year. At that time, the patient had to be rushed to Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi. Today, UP has 2.5 lakh isolation beds, 1.25 lakh ICU/HDU beds. All the districts have an adequate number of ventilators with trained staff to run them. The government also set up L-1, L-2 and L-3 hospitals for patients with mild, severe and critical conditions respectively. Doctors / Paramedical staff were trained for the treatment of Covid-19. Be it medicine, oxygen, equipment or manpower, each hospital was monitored 24x7

and quick diagnosis of the patients was ensured. As a result, the situation remained well under control. On the one hand, the government-run medical institutions provided free treatment to the patients whereas in private hospitals acquired by the government, the cost of treatment was covered under the 'Ayushman Bharat' scheme, which brought great relief to the people from the weaker income groups.

Free treatment of post-covid complications

In view of the reports about mental and physical problems faced by some people who recovered from covid, an innovative effort to set up Post-Covid Ward was made by the Chief Minister. Aimed at speedy diagnosis of post-covid complications, post-covid wards started operating at all the 75 district hospitals. The government also posted psychiatrists and physiotherapists to help people get counselling, if needed. The government also made arrangements for free treatment of such patients.

Deploying senior officers, continuous monitoring was ensured



In his constant endeavour to improve the system in the state during the pandemic, the Chief Minister fielded the secretary and other senior-level administrative officers in the field. Nodal officers were posted in all 75 districts. In all, 59 officers were sent as nodal officers of 75 districts across the state. Senior IAS officers were selected for the mission. These nodal officers were made responsible for covid-19 management and had to stay in their respective districts.



With planned effort and commitment, **UP tops in vaccination drive**

"Vaccination is a security cover for protection against corona. This security cover will be given to every citizen of the state." The Chief Minister has reiterated it on different occasions. His statement underscores the importance of vaccination in his policies.

It is because of such commitment that the statewide vaccination drive in UP is no less than a mega event at a time when even resource-rich states like Delhi and Maharashtra have been stopping vaccination one by one. In UP, vaccine-cover is being provided to 8.5 lakh people on an average every day from June 1 onwards. Earlier, within a few hours of the Central government giving the nod for vaccinating people in the age group of 18-44 from May 1, the Chief Minister announced to implement it in UP, with the state government bearing the entire cost. The vaccination drive started from the due date and has been going on smoothly in the entire state. Separate booths have been set up for the media, court, government employees, etc. Besides "Parents Special" booths for the parents of children below 12 years of age have also been established to give a fillip to the vaccination drive. UP tops in the vaccination drive in the country. Vaccines for the 45+ age group are being provided by the

central government while the 18-44 age group is getting vaccinated from the state government resources. The state government had also issued global tenders to ensure an adequate supply of vaccines for the people. Several other states followed UP in this regard.

Each drop of oxygen used to save patients, NITI Aayog hails the UP model as brilliant

In the midst of the second wave of Corona, when the country was suffering from acute crisis of oxygen, Uttar Pradesh took a step which was highly appreciated everywhere. In view of the increasing demand for oxygen, it streamlined the distribution system to ensure easy availability of oxygen. The NITI Aayog also put its stamp of approval on the steps taken by the UP government. A 'Oxygen Monitoring System for UP' was launched on April 23. As a result, a record supply of 1,000 metric tonnes of oxygen per day was available in just 10 days, which was merely 250 metric tonnes till a few days ago. UP became the first state to implement an online monitoring system for oxygen supply. The Food Safety and Drug Administration, Medical Education Department, Medical Health and

Family Welfare Department, Transport and Home Department were all connected with the digital platform. The location, status of oxygen supply and demand for the oxygen tankers were monitored round the clock on the 'Oxy Cracker Dashboard' in the special control room set up in the Home Department. With online tracking of vehicles pressed into service for oxygen supply, arrangements were made to send the nearest vehicle to the hospital, so that the demand could be met in the shortest possible time. Its success also became a trendsetter for other states. To ensure that every drop of oxygen is used for the treatment of the patients, an adequate quantity of oxygen was brought from the states of West Bengal, Gujarat, Orissa, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, etc. Of course, the Government of India extended special cooperation to the state in this mission. The UP model earned the appreciation of NITI Ayog. Not only this, an audit of oxygen expenditure was also done by seven technical institutions, which reduced its overall consumption by 10 per cent. To overcome the shortage of oxygen tankers, argon tankers were also converted for the use of oxygen with technical support.

CM Yogi remains active "from table to ground level"



In the midst of the Corona epidemic, CM Yogi Adityanath was always present on the frontline. The promptness and commitment with which the current leadership of Uttar Pradesh has worked for the health security and livelihood management of the common man has impressed even the critics. The strong will, commitment and foresight shown by the Chief Minister to defeat the second wave of Corona is an example worth emulating for the Chief Ministers of other states.

On 14 April, the Chief Minister himself got infected with corona. The doctors advised him to take proper rest and isolate himself for some time. All the officials also appealed to him to take rest till his recovery, but the 'Karmayogi' did not take any rest. Although he stayed in home isolation due to the covid protocol, he continued to work and monitor the situation. While in home isolation, he not only held daily review meetings with the officers but also continued the virtual interaction with various sections of the people, including farmers, health experts, sportspersons and members of the monitoring committees.

On April 30, as soon as his report came negative, he returned to ground zero and inspected the progress of the Dedicated Covid Hospital to be built by DRDO at Avadh Shilp Gram in Lucknow. Chief Minister Yogi, who has adopted the formula of Trace,

Test and Treat (Triple T) to contain corona, not only took stock of the overall situation by visiting the districts along with the officials, he also went to the hospitals and directly asked the patients about their well-being. He also toured the villages to interact with the common man in order to their problems.

Yogi Adityanath is the first Chief Minister who knocked at the homes of the corona-infected people and inquired about their health and their needs, and also about the facilities they were getting in the middle of a

raging pandemic

During his 26-day tour, the CM met health workers, policemen, ASHA workers, Anganwadi sisters and appreciated their work while encouraging them to infuse new energy to win the war against coronavirus. Also, by conducting surprise inspections at Integrated Command and Control Centres (ICCC), he oversaw all the arrangements and gave necessary guidelines if any improvement was required.

Monitoring Committees: Great effort of micromanagement

Due to the strategy of a visionary Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the increasing corona infection in the state has been controlled. In this war against the pandemic, no praise is enough for the monitoring committees and rapid response (RR) teams, which have been an important part of the strategy.

These two teams played the most important role in controlling the situation at the micro-level, right from cities to remote villages. CM Yogi had formed separate monitoring committees and rapid response teams for urban and rural areas before the outbreak of the second wave of Corona and chalked out the strategy for carrying out door-to-door screening.

The decisive effort was made to break the chain of corona with the help of four lakh members of 73,441 monitoring committees and 8,000 rapid response trained teams. These committees would do door-to-door screening, get people tested, and kept a vigil on the people coming from outside. They also played the most important role in testing people, providing medical kits and sending them to quarantine. Only people from village/urban wards were kept in these committees and teams. Many people also volunteered to take part in the entire exercise.

Backbone of Covid Management Integrated Command and Control Centre

Chief Minister Yogi has called the integrated system the backbone of covid management. Such control centres have been set up in every district. All the activities were carried out from these centres, which remained active round the clock.

Whether one had to undergo a test, be admitted to a hospital, required medicines or any other essentials during home isolation, or if the patient needed an ambulance at the time of admission and discharge, everything was updated on the Covid portal through monitoring of surveillance and surveillance teams. Skilled and trained personnel were deployed at the centre. Top officials of the district also held meetings every day to take stock of the situation.

Team-11/Team-09: Decentralisation of the System - Responsibility and Accountability

In the battle of Covid, the CM adopted the policy of decentralisation of the system. Responsibilities and accountability of top officials were fixed. During the first wave of covid, Yogi's team-11 earned kudos for its excellent planning despite the fact

Continuous interaction with all sections of society

The Chief Minister, who was applauded on the global stage for ensuring UP's safety during the first wave of covid, has attributed the success to teamwork. During the second wave also, he constantly maintained dialogue with all the sections. He sought everyone's opinion and then made it a part of his strategy as per the needs. In April, even before the infection of Corona increased, Chief Minister Yogi called an all-party meeting and discussed the situation with all the parties. Many leaders of the Opposition praised CM Yogi's initiatives during the meeting. Besides, CM Yogi interacted with his Cabinet colleagues, other public representatives, representatives of municipal bodies, medical experts, religious leaders, traders, sportspersons and farmers, etc. in his bid to raise awareness among people about the epidemic.

that the state was faced with multiple challenges like the return of migrant workers, ensuring the availability of PPE kits, etc.

During the second wave, the CM formed a 9-member team. This team oversaw the work related to covid management at the state level, made policy decisions and implemented them at the ground level. The biggest challenge in the second wave was the arrangement of beds and oxygen for the rising number of patients. However, he formed Team-9 which planned brilliantly to tackle the situation. Team-9 reports directly to the Chief Minister. The entire work, from the availability of covid beds, human resources, training and immunisation work, medical kits, testing and health facilities augmentation, monitoring of ICCC and CM helpline, smooth availability of oxygen, sanitation, fogging, sanitisation, containment zones, law and order, weekly closures, compliance with the Covid protocol, etc was divided among the members of this team. This arrangement yielded positive results. On the same lines, similar teams were formed in the districts as well.

Support of
**'Uttar Pradesh Mukhyamantri
Bal Seva Yojna'**
to orphaned children



The children who have been orphaned during the pandemic are being provided support from Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. The Chief minister has announced to start 'Uttar Pradesh Mukhyamantri Bal Seva Yojana' under which the government will provide all the resources for their welfare including upbringing, education and other necessary things. Under the scheme, the government will take care of children who have lost their parents or legal guardian during the pandemic.

A financial assistance of Rs. 4,000 per month will be provided to the guardian or caregiver of the child until the child becomes an adult. Not only this, the children studying in schools will be given tablets or laptops, and the government will also make proper arrangements for the marriage of girls. A sum of Rs 1,01,000 will be given by the state government for the marriage of the girl child.

Convenient teleconsultation-e-consultation in times of disaster

Be it patients undergoing treatment in home isolation during the corona period, or non-covid patients, the government provided proper medical consultation to all. While Uttar Pradesh stood second in the country in consultation with doctors through e-Sanjeevani App of the Health Department, a separate phone line was set up for it at the Integrated Command and Control Centre. The Chief Minister himself appealed to the doctors seeking their cooperation in this work. Such services were operated by government as well as private hospitals.

Team of health experts strengthened the fight against covid-19

A team of health experts was also

Morning cleanliness, afternoon sanitisation and evening fogging



Be it corona or waterborne and viral diseases, cleanliness, sanitisation and fogging are of great importance for preventing them. Chief Minister Yogi, who has successfully fought a disease like encephalitis for the state, gave the mantra of 'morning cleanliness, afternoon sanitisation and fogging in the evening' to the people of the state. A campaign on it was launched by the Urban Development and Rural Development Departments at the time of corona curfew. While interacting with the traders, farmers, monitoring committees, the Chief Minister called for their cooperation to make it successful. As a result, the active participation of the common people was witnessed in the cleanliness work. Every day in the meeting of Team-9, all information about the activities related to the campaign was compulsorily passed on to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. From villages to cities, this special effort played a big role in the prevention of epidemics. Now, in the rainy season, when there is a possibility of the outbreak of diseases like encephalitis, chikungunya, dengue, etc, the cleanliness, sanitisation and fogging drive is being intensified across the state.

formed to strengthen the fight against Corona in the state. Doctors from reputed medical institutions such as SGPGI, KGMU, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, RML Institute have been included in the advisory committee. This team is making the strategy for effective control of covid.

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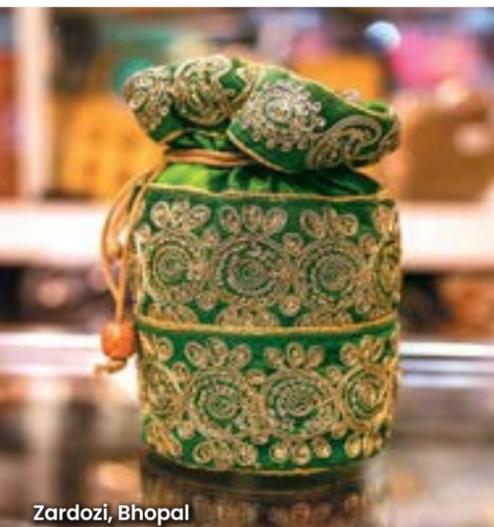


Carpet Weaving, Gwalior



Metal Craft, Tikamgarh

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Zardozi, Bhopal



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Terracotta Craft, Chhatarpur

july

Voices of
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*“The future of India
lies in its villages”*

– Mahatma Gandhi

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Cover photograph: SHUTTERSTOCK



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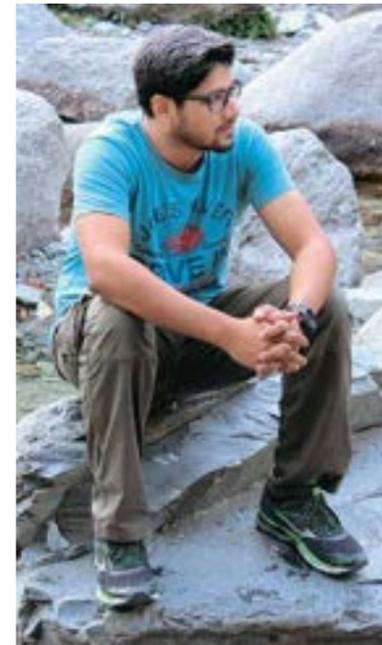
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Through the Rural Lands to Your Heart



It's just hours before this issue is going to be sent to print that I'm writing the editor's note – causing many in the design and production teams to endure anxiety attacks! Those of you who understand the operational aspects of publishing would know that it is a borderline scary scenario. I couldn't have done differently though.

When we first discussed that we'll bring this one out as a spotlight issue, the main thought was on magnifying the efforts of a group of individuals who united for an initiative called Voices of Rural India – or VoRI, as you'll find mentioned in the folio of the magazine.

Several virtual handshakes and digital letters later, things were

in place. This, everyone agreed, would be a nice one! And it is.

These pages – of the July 2021 issue that you're holding – aren't merely carriers of words from the rural parts of India; they are gleaming recollections of memories of the people who inhabit those lands.

There's no denying that COVID-19 has been a dreadful reality. People in the rural regions have suffered beyond comprehension but their tenacity makes them triumph over adversity, eventually.

To assist them in regaining their way of life, the team of VoRI embarked on a not-for-profit mission to create a tangential opportunity of livelihood for the rural dwellers. They set up a storytelling platform where people from local communities can publish narratives which are unique to their respective lands. These are enchanting tales from the deepest corners of the country which will echo in the hearts of everyone who reads them.

The enchanting tales from the deepest corners of the country will echo in the hearts of everyone who reads them

The members of VoRI run training modules to prime the local storytellers and the ones that make the cut are subsequently published on www.voicesofruralindia.com (do give them a visit). There are several ways that you can support this initiative – become a volunteer, partner with them in some meaningful capacity, or if you can't be physically present but still want to support their noble work, contribute financially.

I've heard many, many beautiful stories of lands afar but there are countless more that I am yet to discover. Well, I discovered a few while putting together this month's magazine!

With this special issue, I, too, have embarked on a special journey with the title that I've admired as a reader for years. Wish me luck as I join hands with others in the team to take Outlook Traveller on newer, fulfilling and exciting journeys.

Ashish Jha @AJ2eets



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A passage through India

In Wanderers, Kings, Merchants, a brand new book I'm reading on the roots (and routes) of Indian languages, author Peggy Mohan writes, "When languages die, it is an omen, of things to come that are still beyond our range of vision." But if dying languages are doomed canaries in a coal mine, what about stories and storytelling? Do they speak of invisible threats too, of impending loss, when they evaporate from our lives, our imagination? Do they also foretell the death of languages, the loss of dialects? (They do.)

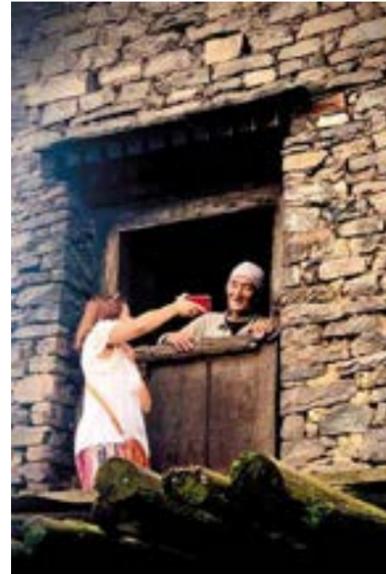
This special issue that you hold in your hands though, is not about cautionary tales, or words brined in regret. It's about hope and joy, and celebrating stories (and storytelling) across the diverse states of India. It's about handing over the mic to the local communities, and listening to their stories, in their voice. It's about taking pride in the oral traditions of India, and hoping earnestly that we can hold on to them for a little while longer...

Those of you who have followed the journey of Outlook Traveller over the years would know that long before it became fashionable to talk about hyperlocal

experiences or sustainability, responsible tourism or *dekho apna desh*, our intrepid editors and writers sought out people and places that mattered in their own country.

They did so, not only on airplanes and trains, but also on foot, and in jalopies that were barely held together by fearlessness and faith. And at least in one instance, a legendary editor traipsed across hills and dales, 'mythical' roads and rivers, for four

This special issue that you hold in your hands is about hope and joy, and celebrating stories from rural India



straight days to reach a place in eastern Arunachal Pradesh that Salman Khan (and you) can now cycle up to in a fraction of that time. Such epic trips were made by the early tribe of travel writers if only to seek out the company of new friends and listen to their stories over a shared cup of *chhang*. In time, we inherited their legacy, their phonebooks, and sometimes, their friends in faraway places.

So, when we decided to finally formalise our commitment to people- and planet-friendly travel, and launched the Outlook Responsible Tourism Initiative in 2015, we knew we would be a sturdy new branch of a fabled, native tree. Today, whether we run national level awards or outreach programmes in the states, work with the Ministry of Tourism (India) or affiliate global organisations like the UNWTO, we fall back on 20 years of insights, and plenty of *chhang*-aided goodwill. We celebrate and support some of the most inspired travel communities across India and South Asia. And we do so, because we always have.

The voices of rural India that you hear between these pages are no canaries in a cage. They are proud emissaries of resilient communities that also host responsible travellers in unpandemicked times. They are independent, digitally empowered storytellers, who sing of worlds that they hope to protect and honour. And so do we.

Soity Banerjee
Project Editor,
Outlook Responsible Tourism Initiative

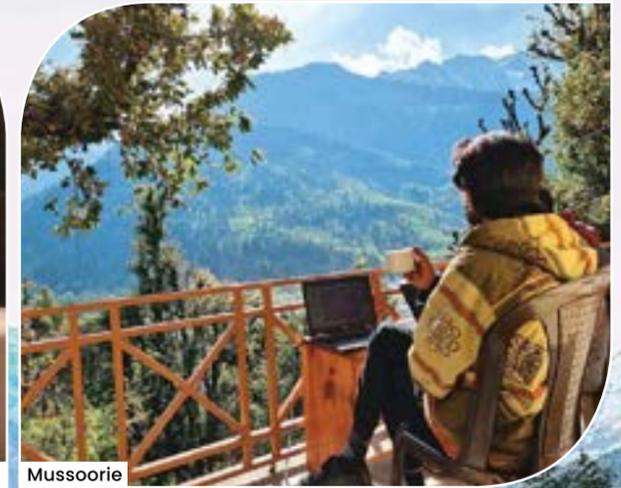


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↗ A part of a village in the far lands of Himachal

Stories of Rural India

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

A

AS TRAVELLERS, WE PAN THE LANDSCAPE FOR THE GOLD

of insights about any destination and the people who inhabit it. At the heart of travel – between memory, the windows into the past, and imagination that open out into the future – lie stories. India, with its diverse landscape and cultures, is a land of infinite stories with a great spectrum of people who tell them. At one end live those who are in a temporal wrap (some that are ancient yet surviving), and at the other are people who are so modern that they are leading the way of living lightly and have the smallest ecological footprint. It is this spectrum of people that makes travel what it is meant to be: understanding ourselves and our place by experiencing the other.

When the Covid pandemic hit in early 2020, of the moving parts that make up the



↖ People go about their regular village life

Indian tourism industry – the traveller and tourism enterprises – had a voice, choice, and agency. The voice to turn the crisis of the pandemic-induced lockdown into an opportunity to rethink, reset, rebuild, and advocate for relief. The choice to pivot into

new digital opportunities while sheltering at home. Or to diversify, re-imagine and recast themselves with newly positioned products for a changed world of travel. Many community tourism enterprises that work with such destinations and

communities had to fold or morph.

Despite growing access to smartphones and the internet, the lack of digital skills and tailored opportunities in rural areas in India held people back.

At the heart of all destinations, and particularly with community tourism enterprises, are the people from those communities who inhabit the landscape – the local guides, the homestay hosts, the taxi drivers, dhaba owners, craftspeople, natural medicine practitioners, musicians, local environmentalists who generously

a travel blogger, a community leader, and a digital wizard entrepreneur and driven by the desire to give rural voices their rightful place.

Voices of Rural India is currently working with rural communities in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, and Gujarat, through on-ground community-based tourism organisations: Himalayan Ark, Global Himalayan Expedition, Spiti Ecosphere, Himalayan Ecotourism, Kabani, Grassroutes Journeys and Cherish

In the short term, Voices of Rural India is creating a revenue stream for remote communities through digital journalism. Funding from the Digital Empowerment Foundation helps pay storytellers directly in their bank account for every story published, as is the case when these stories are republished by our media partners.

In the long run, Voices of Rural India will continue to develop digital storytelling skills at the grassroots level. And for our communities themselves, it is a coming together of storytellers from diverse



↗ Crops like maize are rooted deep in the culture of rural India



↘ India is a treasure chest of local art

draw travellers into their world. Each of these community tourism enterprises crafted experiences for the travellers that were unique to their landscape.

One such community tourism enterprise, Himalayan Ark, located in a remote village in Uttarakhand, comes together every summer to go birdwatching, butterfly spotting, learn yoga and run high altitude trail runs! In one such excursion, the idea of *@voicesofmunsiri* came about – an Instagram channel run collectively by the village folk, sharing their everyday lives with the outside world. In subsequent years, *@voicesofmunsiri*, driven purely by the passion of local creators, convinced us of the untapped talent and the need to create more digital storytelling opportunities. The pandemic that severed communities from any livelihood from tourism, served as the impetus to bring like-minded community organisations across India on board to co-create a not-for-profit digital platform for rural storytellers. In August 2020, Voices of Rural India was born, more ambitious in scope, through the coming together of

VoRI was born through the coming together of a travel blogger, a community leader, and a digital wizard entrepreneur

Expeditions – all glowing examples of rural tourism in India.

With over 40 stories so far, the themes on the Voices of Rural India platform span everything from the age-old traditions, the aesthetics and architecture of old village houses in India, women empowerment in rural India, lost Himalayan superfoods, the challenges of conservation and development in rural India, to how Indian village life has changed over the decades.

The storytellers are typically guides, homestay hosts, people involved in tourism, and youth and women from the community, and through our intensive storytelling process, we hope they can come to proudly own their heritage, traditions, culture, food, and connection with nature.

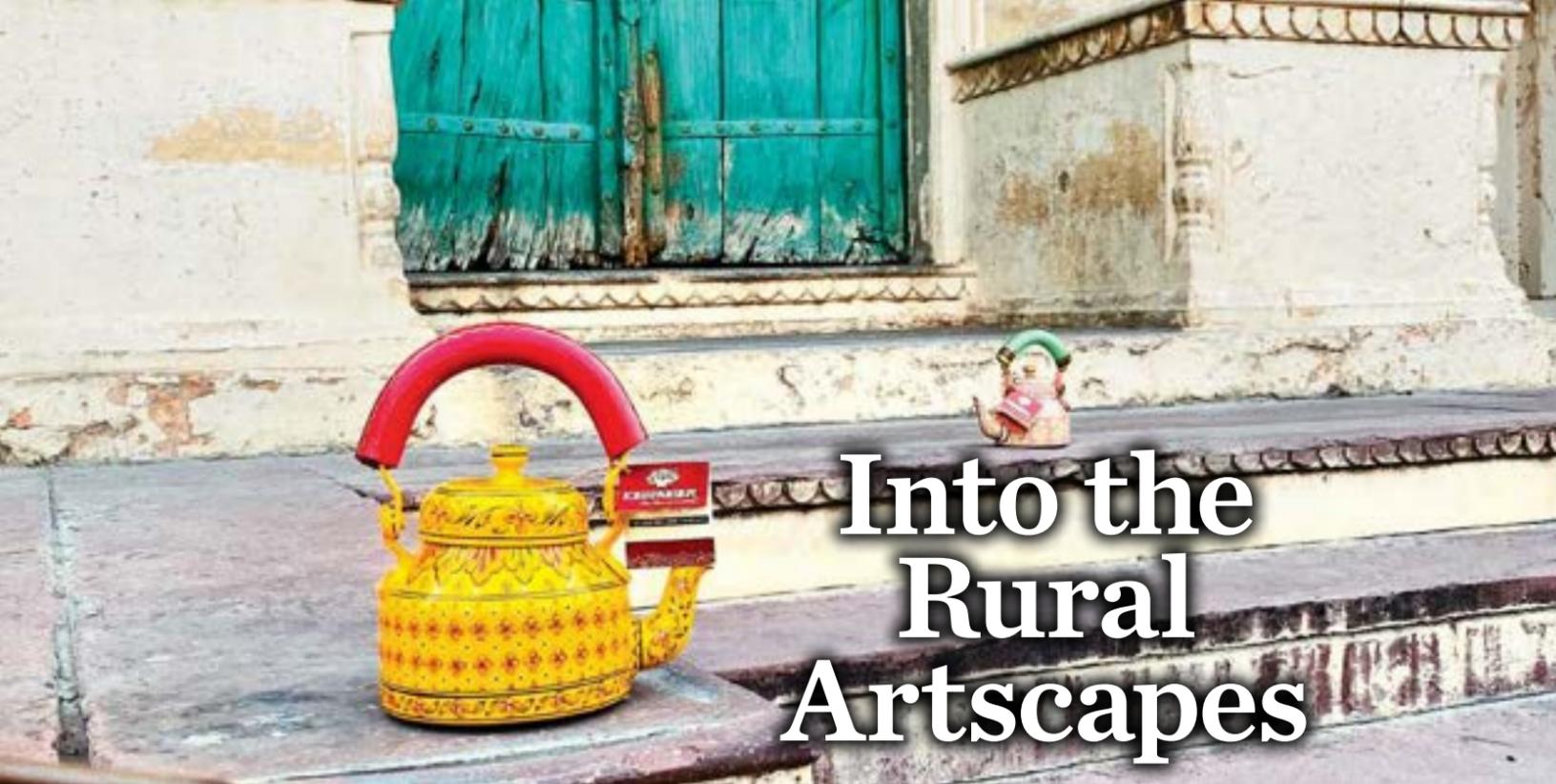
landscapes in the creation of a repository of their local culture, knowledge systems, and a celebration of rural life, documented in local voices.

For the rest of us stuck at home, this is a chance to explore remote corners of India virtually, through the words, photos, and videos of the very people we travel to meet, in their language, if you choose to. While tele tours are becoming a popular way to teleport and travel virtually, here we invite you to a more personal delving, deeper into the intimate space of stories shared by the tellers who belong to and own those landscapes. It is also an open invitation to come to experience these inspiring, amazing villages in India in the post-covid phase of travel!

Shivya Nath, Author and Travel blogger at *The Shooting Star*

Malika Viridi, Founder Director of *Himalayan Ark* and currently the sarpanch of the *Sarmoli Jainti Van Panchayat* in Uttarakhand

Osama Manzar, Founder of the *Digital Empowerment Foundation*



Into the Rural Artscapes

Kaushalam is ensuring the flow of creativity and taking an active step towards keeping the Indian art traditions alive



“Being a woman, the journey had its own struggle and working in a niche segment had its own challenges. From wandering through narrow alleys of small cities in hot sunny afternoons, long nights spent working at the exhibitions to managing within the tight financials and the uncertainty of future prospects, a passionate entrepreneur can overcome it all. Never give up, have the courage and vision to change the adversity into an opportunity. That’s the way to success for me.”

MRINALIKA (JAIN) BHARDWAJ
Founder, Kaushalam

Founded in 2012, Kaushalam is the brainchild of social entrepreneur and artist, Mrinalika Jain Bhardwaj. Driven by the aim of creating a niche in the world of art and craft, the central focus with Kaushalam has always been to revive the regional, folk, and traditional art of India.

Having gradually declined due to the rapidly accelerating popularity of the modern interpretations / concepts of contemporary art, it is imperative to bring back the timehonoured practices and creations to their deserving pedestal.

With the backdrop of causing a complete

transformation to make traditional art more desirable in the business world, Kaushalam ventured on a journey of showcasing traditional art on specially designed artefacts. The resultant efforts have been appreciated by art lovers as well as by the people scouting for colourful objects.

The voyage of painting utility items by hand began from a 600 square feet studio space in Jaipur. With Kaushalam, the traditions and cultures stretching centuries back are being kept alive today, and the creations are well known across the globe.

With insufficient funds and lack of

good artisans being the main roadblocks, Mrinalika turned challenges into opportunities by single handedly managing the operations, and onboarding skilled craftspeople who'd forsaken their skills of indigenous art in lure of money, but were stuck doing menial daily wage jobs.

As of today, several artists' livelihoods have been restored thanks to the support of Kaushalam, and they are actively assisting our movement to revive the traditional arts of India. The institution has grown robustly to become a habitat for artisans from Kashmir, Ladakh, Bihar, and several parts of Rajasthan.



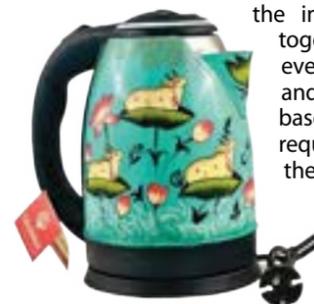
ABOUT THE TEAM:

With a sharp eye on quality, the team at Kaushalam works tirelessly to ensure that only the most authentic work with finest details of each of the traditional arts is shipped. Maintaining the originality of regional art and fusing it with modern concepts to give it a fresh and new look is what makes Kaushalam unique, and the artisans' pursuit to paint each piece of work to perfection gives the art pieces soul and texture of emotions.

THE PRODUCTS — KAUSHALAM ARTENSILS

Known for hand painted kettles and every kind of utensil, which are called Artensils, Kaushalam takes inspiration from the rich Indian heritage, diverse cultures, and day-to-day life. They are not merely products; they're reflections of the past and present. They are bearers of art and history with a sprinkle of modernity. Every piece is created with great love and care, with artisans investing their heart and soul into every creation.

Handicrafts and hand painted products for home and garden is Kaushalam's area of expertise and artists can paint any artwork on any surface. With the intent of bringing together art styles of every state of India, and customisation based on specific requirements, make the products stand out in the handicraft industry.



KAUSHALAM IN 2021:

- * The venture is a source of livelihood for many women as well as artisans of rural India, and Kaushalam is constantly looking to hire more artisans, with focus on rural areas, for its manufacturing facility in Jaipur, Rajasthan.
- * Kaushalam successfully runs its retail store in Jaipur which is extremely popular and visited by Indian and foreign travellers alike
- * Thanks to the increase in exports, Kaushalam's product range is visible all across the globe
- * With overseas demand on the rise, Kaushalam intends to offer greater convenience to its customers by forming exclusive alliances for brand outlets
- * Each year, Kaushalam introduces a new art form collection which is showcased to the clients at various festivals and exhibitions. So far, Mughal art of Jaipur, Madhubani art from Bihar, Thangka and Buddhist art from Ladakh, Pichhwai art from Nathdwara, Phad from Bhilwara, and Kashmiri art from Kashmir have been proudly presented

ABOUT THE FOUNDER:

Mrinalika is not only its founder, but a parent who has nurtured Kaushalam to great heights of success. With her passion towards the mission of preserving and growing traditional art of India, she's afforded a rewarding platform for the artisans to showcase their work reflecting art, heritage, and culture. Having invested herself wholeheartedly in it, Mrinalika has made Kaushalam a globally recognised name in the realm of hand painted traditional art work.

A post graduate in Fine Arts, she hails from Jaipur, and is a disciple of legendary artist, Pandit Dwarka Prasad Sharma, to whom she credits her foundation in painting and for turning her into an artist who thrives on experimenting with colours and creates masterpieces.

She worked as a freelance artist for almost a decade in New York, USA and has travelled to several countries, learning about their traditional art forms. Her global exposure and unique perspectives facilitated the setting up (in April 2012), and moulding, of 'Kaushalam'.

Being married to an Army officer allowed her to explore vivid regions of India, and it was during her time in Ladakh that she was given an opportunity to take Ladakhi artisans to Jaipur. The influence of the beautiful heritage city of Jaipur is amply reflected in her work. Mrinalika is a social entrepreneur and intends to uplift rural women by giving them basic training in art and colouring, therefore paving way for a respectable and sustained livelihood for them, and establishing a strong workforce of women artists.

In times when rural art forms are drifting into obscurity, Mrinalika's venture 'Kaushalam' strives endlessly to bring back those art forms to life. Through Kaushalam, the continued efforts to grow the legacy of the crafts have reached global landmarks. Not only are the voices of rural India being heard through the display of these traditional arts, it is also providing an opportunity to the craftspeople to sustain, with dignity, what their elders have left behind.

Visit: www.kaushalamcreations.com

20

SPITI

Destined TO BE

In this time of kalyug, a man embarks on a journey of sacrifice and penance in search of truth and knowledge.

↳ Starlit sky
in the Spiti
Valley is
breathtaking

A

ABOUT 1.5 KILOMETRES NORTH OF DEMUL
VILLAGE IN SPITI,

where I was born, is a very old cave named Khabsa. Over thousands of years, in this very cave, many dedicated men from Demul and other regions of the Himalaya have achieved wisdom and enlightenment through extreme penance.

One wise man among them is Tenzin Lundup, also known as the 'Yogi of the Himalaya'.

On April 20, 1962, in a Gongma home in the village of Pooh in Kinnaur district, a baby boy named Govind Singh was born. While pregnant, his mother Sonam Chhodon felt a divine presence and had a vivid dream – that an enlightened being is going to be born to her. So, when the baby arrived, the family visited the local Guru in the area and asked about what's in store for his future.

The Guru stated that in his previous birth, Govind Singh was a devoted yogi. He predicted that even in this birth, the boy would renounce his household responsibilities and travel in search of truth and knowledge. The boy's father, Gelek Pasang (alias Gurdayal Singh), was disappointed to learn this. He wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and become a farmer and businessman.

A few months after he was born, a prominent Ladakhi lama (monk), through his meditative power, realised that the child born in Pooh village, on the full moon day of April, is the reincarnation of a great yogi. He sent a search team of lamas and representatives to the village. However, his father, who did not want his only son to renounce the world and become a lama, told the Ladakhi team that no child had been born in their home!

GOVIND HAD
three

sisters and a younger brother, and his childhood was full of love and affection. As a young boy, he was compassionate, loved music and felt eager to serve others. He pursued his graduation in Chandigarh

SHUTTERSTOCK



Govind ji underwent solitary penance many times

CHHERING NORBU

and returned to his village with an increased interest in spirituality. He would discuss the teachings of the Buddha with his grandfather, and go to Ta-Lang Temple, to Mani Dung Gyur, for circumambulation. There he would sit among the elderly to enhance his Buddhist learnings.

Upon seeing his interest in Buddhism, his family worried that the prediction about his future might come true. They decided to get him engaged against his wish at the age of 25. In a traditional Kinnauri ceremony, he was married to Ringzin, the daughter of Pooh's most elite and wealthy family.

Just as his wife became pregnant, he felt the need to renounce worldly affairs before he got attached to his child. Soon, he left everything far behind in search of knowledge and a Guru.

He initially joined the Bir Gonpa (monastery), where along with young lamas, he started learning the Bhoti language. He continued his studies in Bylakuppe, Mysuru's Tibetan colony, while also teaching English to the local Rinpoche and lamas. After completing his education and

initiation there he left for a long pilgrimage with a focus on Lord Buddha's pilgrim sites, monasteries and pious caves.

HE WAS overjoyed

to meet his sisters again in Solan after many years. He decided to repair his grandfather's ancestral home, where for 2.5 years, he immersed himself in prayers, meditation and daily practice. To fulfil his mother's wish, he spent a year in Pooh, where his dedication to prayers took her by complete surprise.

Then began a long set of nomadic travels. He moved from Pooh to Rewalsar, where the holy spirit of Guru Padmasambhava – the founder of Tantrayana Buddhism (Nyingmapa Sect) still resides in Rewalsar Lake. He then accepted an invitation to move to Nako village in Kinnaur, following which he meditated for a year in the holy cave of Somang, where he was subjected to scarcity of food and firewood during the heavy winter snowfall.

Govind Ji sets out on the path to enlightenment



female energy) for the welfare of all living beings and humanity.

By this time, word about this great yogi had spread far and wide. People from every corner of the Himalayas started to come to seek his blessings and discourse. Locals from Nesang village invited him to the famous Naijal Cave, where Guru Padmasambhava himself had performed penance and till date many pious symbols can be found on the stones of the cave.

Govind ji accepted the invitation and decided to travel about 60 kilometres over five days by foot from Pooh to Naijal cave located 15,000 feet above sea level with winter temperatures dropping as low as -35 degrees celsius. He stopped at every village along the way, encouraging people to follow Buddha's path. At Nijal cave, he performed penance for almost 1.5 years, following

Going ji underwent deep, solitary penance for four yers in Maling and during this time, he did not meet anyone. Important messages were conveyed through letters

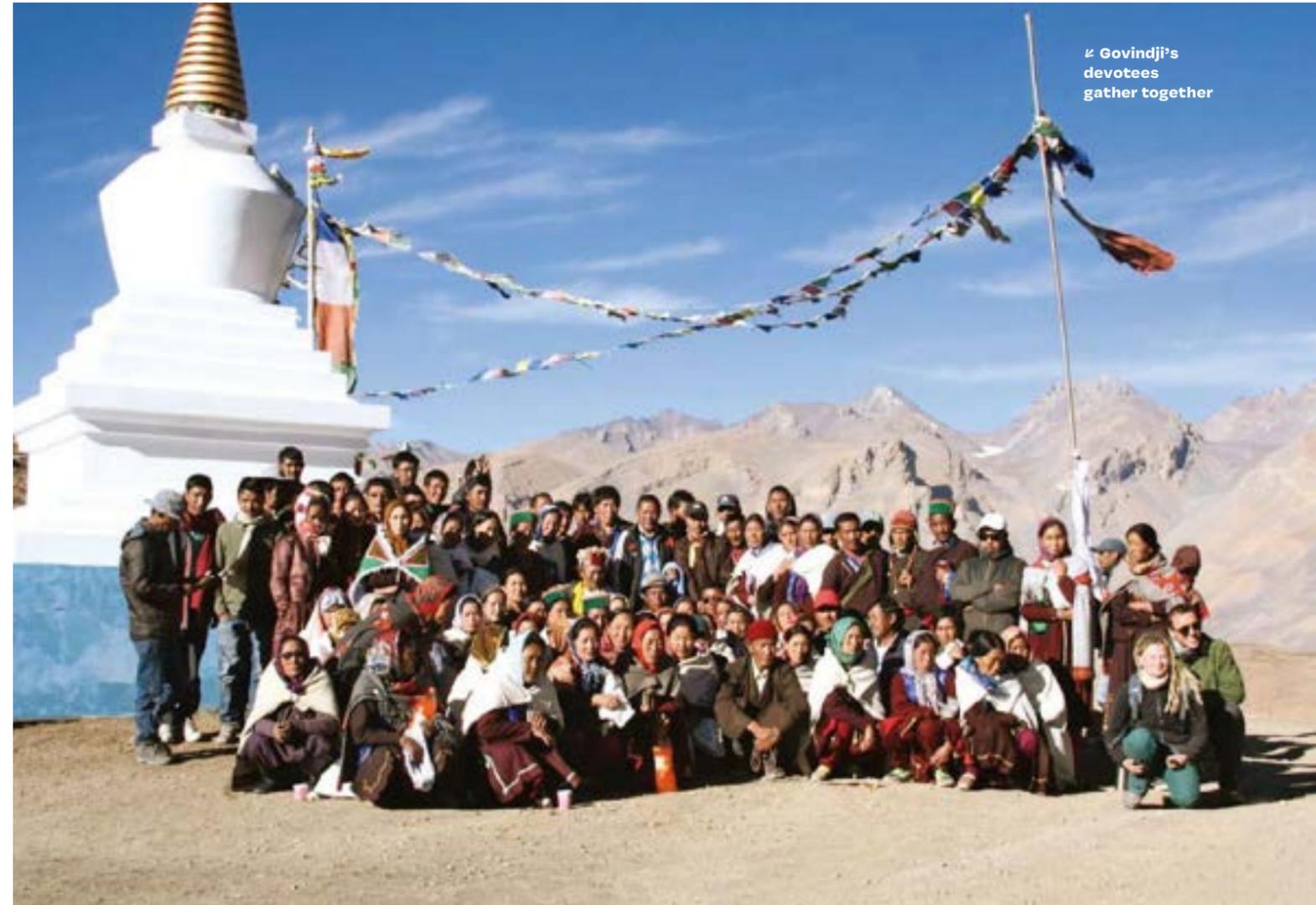
which, in 2014, he began walking for nearly 450 kilometres, to Dehradun.

This journey on foot became a historic event as hundreds of people joined him on the way. Wherever the group took a break, the locals would arrange for their dining and lodging. Everyone shared their individual problems with Govind ji and received blessings from him.

Govind ji by now has set foot in pretty much every village in upper Kinnaur and Spiti, gained followers in every Himalayan region and has been on a pilgrimage to Nepal, Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Sarnath, Varanasi, Vaishali and Bhutan. He urges people to follow the path of truth and non-violence, and imparts knowledge on the topics of Buddha Consciousness and Space Consciousness. Even the local priests request people to implement his teachings in their everyday life.

No one has seen such a yogi in this age, and I consider myself lucky to have met him at his birthplace. I had the opportunity to discuss many different subjects with him, and left the meeting feeling inspired, with a growing interest in spirituality and social work.

Govindji's devotees gather together



CHHERING NORBU



Now known as Yogi of the Himalaya

Even though his father tried to send him on the path of business and family life, he was fated to become a great yogi. It makes one wonder; did he choose his destiny or did his destiny choose him?

*Somang Hangrang Valley, Kinnaur, is among one of many famous pilgrim sites, with five grand caves whose rocks are etched with symbols of the Maitreya Buddha, Guru PadmaSambhava (Guru Rinpoche) and Dakini. 📍

info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to reach

There are 2 overland routes to reach Spiti.

Via Manali or Shimla:

By Air: Shimla and Kullu have occasional flights. The alternate closest airport is

Chandigarh from where you can get a cab to Shimla (3-4 hours) or Manali (7-8 hours)

By Road: Regular AC/ Non-AC buses are available from Delhi and Chandigarh.

By Train: Chandigarh

and Shimla are both connected by train. From Manali, keep aside another day (approx. 7 to 8 hrs) to reach Spiti.

From Shimla, keep aside 2 days (approx. 7 to 8 hrs each day) to reach Spiti.

What to do

Ecosphere offers a range of travel programs and experiences in Spiti, some of which explore the mystical and hidden virtues of the Valley. Their journeys not only leave an everlasting impression, but are carefully designed to support the culture, environment and economy of Spiti Valley.

How to get involved

Ecospere is a social enterprise and by travelling or volunteering with them, you directly support and contribute towards various community initiatives in the valley. Support them by travelling to Spiti and getting involved in one or many of their initiatives.

For more details, you can write to them on discover@spitiecospere.com, or visit their website www.spitiecospere.com

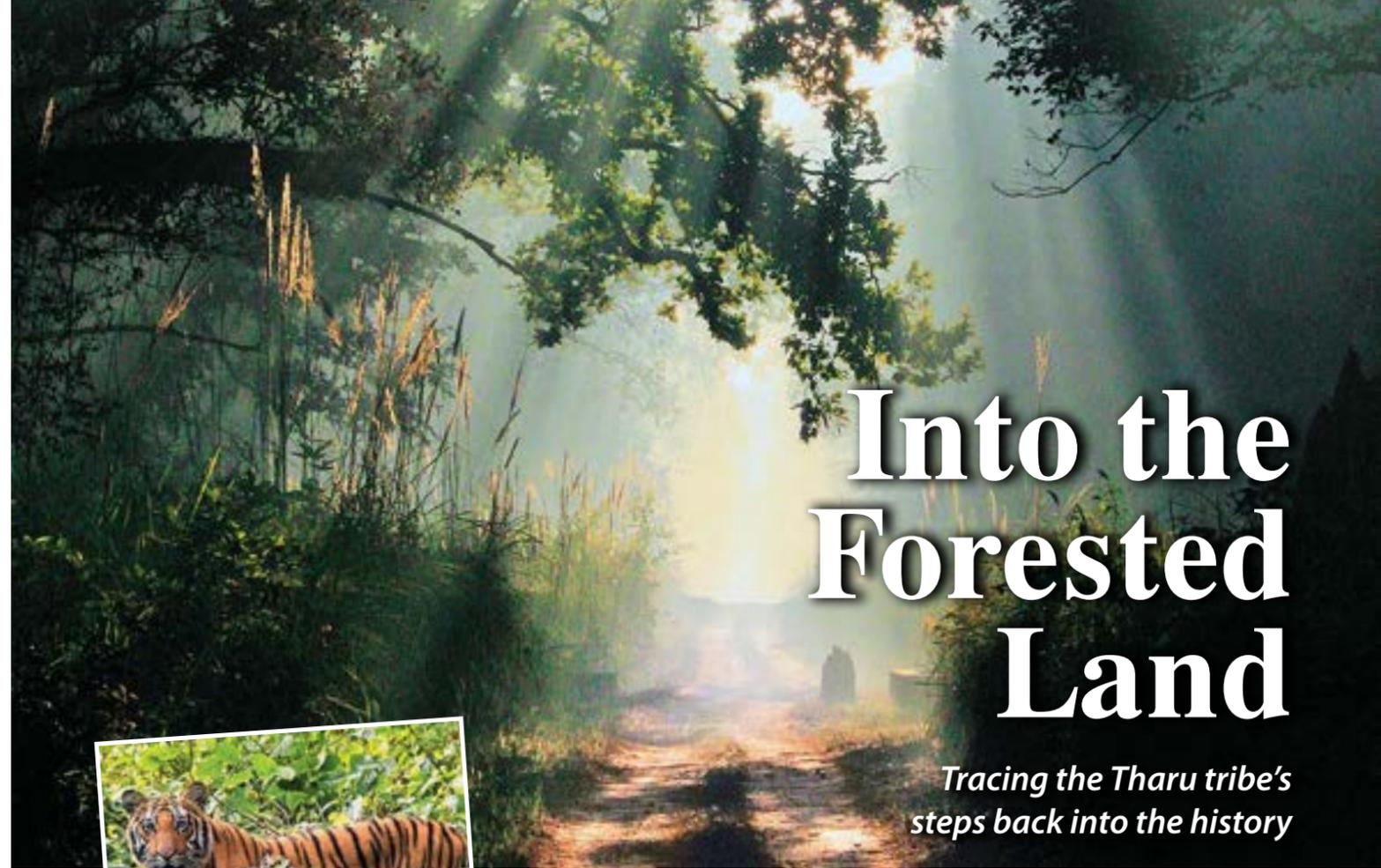


ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

CHHERING NORBU

is a dynamic individual with a vast array of experience in various fields ranging from tourism to mountaineering, solar energy, hydrogeology, medicinal plants and the list can go on! He belongs to a family of Amchis (traditional medicinal practitioners) and is now one of the few remaining practicing Amchis in Spiti. He is also the life-force of Spiti Ecosphere managing day to day operations seamlessly.

Supported by-
Spiti Ecosphere



Into the Forested Land

Tracing the Tharu tribe's steps back into the history

the designs of their verandas—colourful and printed—are based on traditional learning. Although the tribe follows Hinduism and its traditions, the women here have a stronger right and hold when it comes to property.

The Tharu tribe believes in peaceful coexistence among all species and this is best displayed perfectly thanks to the region they inhabit — Terari — which is teeming with wildlife.

Dudhwa National Park which, together with Kishanpur and Katarnighat wildlife sanctuaries, forms the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, is among the most famous wildlife destinations

Uttar Pradesh has been known for preserving cultures, traditions, history, tribes and beliefs for many years now.

While cultures and traditions reside in every nook and corner here, many tribes, peppered across the state, also call it home. One such tribe is Tharu, residing in the lowlands of the Terai region, in the foothills of the Himalaya.

Lovers of nature and followers of Theravada Buddhism, these tribal people of the forest are eco-friendly, survive on minimal forest produce, and are mostly engaged in farming activities or forest dwelling, and till date inhabit forested areas.

People of the Tharu tribe mainly follow the teachings of Lord Buddha. The tribe is also closely linked and has a deep, longstanding respect for the environment and they worship a large number of deities residing in the forests.

Each village belonging to the tribe is governed by a council and a headman. The tribe can often be seen conversing in multiple Tharu dialects — including Hindi, Awadhi and Maithili.

The tribe is deeply rooted in tradition and it is evident in the construction and decoration of their houses. While the outer walls of their house are made of clay, dung, mud and grass,

The government of Uttar Pradesh has outlined a plan to connect Tharu villages across the districts of Balrampur, Bahraich, Lakhimpur and Pilibhit bordering Nepal with the homestay scheme of the UP Forest Department. Aimed at preserving the tribe's unique culture, but also allowing others to witness and learn from it, the scheme will allow travellers to go to the Tharu villages and live among the members of the tribe, and understand more about their way of life.

Not only will it create employment opportunities for the tribe but will also help them preserve and showcase their culture to the world. All income generation under the scheme will also be given directly to the homestay owner.



not only in the Terai region, but the whole of the country. It is a nine-hour journey by road from New Delhi, and Dehradun, and about 5-6 hours from Lucknow.

The landscape of the northern part of U.P. is breathtaking and there great places to explore near Dudhwa National Park. You can pay a visit to the Shiva temple at Gola Gokarannath, or the famous and magnificent Menduk Mandir (Frog Temple) in the town of Oel in Lakhimpur, while there's also the impressively build Naseeruddin Memorial Hall to give you a glimpse into India's past.



↳ The village of Demul, where Norbu grew up

More than five centuries ago, an enlightened monk promised to always protect the mountain village of Giu in Spiti. His blood, hair and nails are evidence that he still does



ERIK WARDELL

LIFELESS, BUT **Alive**

26
SPITI

G

GIU — A HIGH-ALTITUDE MOUNTAIN VILLAGE,

flanked by Tibet to the east and Ladakh to the north, is surrounded by snow laden peaks in the trans-Himalayan region of Spiti. Giu is famous the world over for the mystery around the ancient Mummy of Lama Kambo.

Home to roughly 250 people, Giu remained cut off from the world with barely any road access until recently.

I grew up in the village of Demul in Spiti and since childhood I enjoyed sitting with the village elders, listening to ancestral stories. I'm lucky to have once visited the mummy of Giu with my father — and numerous times since — and heard the extraordinary story of it from our local friends.

IN THE 14th century,

an extraordinary child was born in Giu. He was named Sangha Tenzin. After excelling in studies, he embarked on the path of Buddhism and gave up all worldly pleasures to become a lama (monk). He spent years meditating in a cave and ultimately gained enlightenment.

Back in those days Giu was a happy place, but the surrounding mountains were home to demons who constantly harassed its people and put a curse on the entire village. The elders of the village urged Lama Sangha Tenzin to save them. He agreed and spent the next few years engaged in chanting sacred mantras and practicing tantric rituals.

He gained the skill to take control of any kind of evil power and on a full moon night, the lama destroyed the demons. He reassured the people that whenever the need arose in the future, he would come to protect the village.

He expressed a wish for three stupas to be constructed atop his cave so that people could view them collectively as a symbol of good triumphing over evil. The village residents agreed to his wish in gratitude.

AS HUNDREDS OF years

passed, people gradually forgot about the lama and his cave. In 1975, an earthquake caused destruction in the entire Himalayan region, also destroying the lama's stupas.

During the construction of a road in the region under the



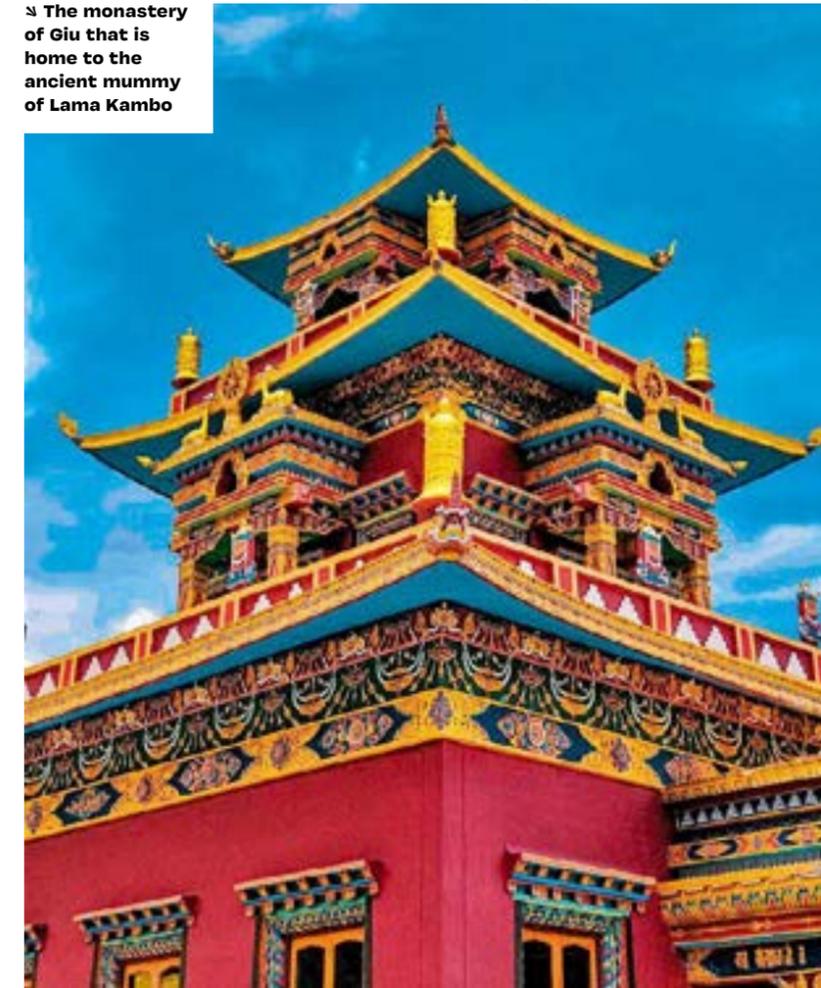
CHERRING NORBU

↳ Lama Kambo — the mummy of Giu!

SPITI
VORI

GOWTHAM NATARAJAN

↳ The monastery of Giu that is home to the ancient mummy of Lama Kambo





Spiti's beautiful landscapes are unparalleled

SPITI ECOSPHERE

supervision of the Indian Army, one of the broken stupas was discovered. As the rubble was being cleared, a worker's equipment hit a skull, out of which blood started to flow.

People first thought it was the head of a dead calf but as it was pulled out in its entirety, they were in a state of shock and awe – the Giu mummy had been unearthed!

As the rubble was being cleared, a worker's equipment hit a skull, out of which blood started to flow. It was that of Lama Sangha Tenzin

When the news was relayed to the Indian government, an investigation team was sent to Giu. They confirmed that the Giu mummy dated back to the 14th century. It was 550 years old. Everyone was amazed and puzzled upon discovering that the mummy's hair and nails continued to grow even after all these centuries!



MAYURA MALI

Seeking Buddha's blessings

Mummy of Giu in a Glass case



MAYURA MALI

THE PEOPLE OF Giu

consulted their local Rinpoche (Buddhist spiritual leader) and deity, and learned that the mummy was none other than their beloved protector Lama Sangha Tenzin. The

blood, hair and nails are evidence that his soul is still alive and continues to reside within his body.

The residents of Giu requested the Indian and Tibetan border police for custody of the mummy, so that a temple could be constructed in the lama's honor. Their

request was granted, and today, visitors from around the world come to Giu to pay their respects and learn about this unsolved mystery of the Giu mummy.

Lama Kambo continues to meditate in the seated posture, keeping his promise to guard the village. 🙏

info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

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- ☒ **By Air:** Shimla and Kullu have occasional flights. The alternate closest airport is Chandigarh from where you can get a cab to Shimla (3-4 hours) or Manali (7-8 hours)
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How to get involved

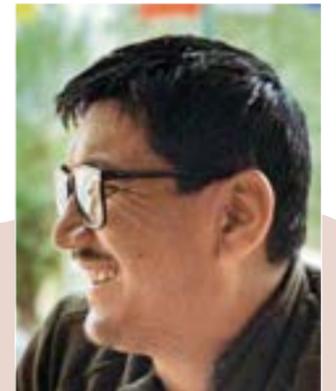
☒ Ecosphere is a social enterprise so by travelling or volunteering with them you directly support and contribute towards various community initiatives in the valley.

You can:

- ☒ Travel with Ecosphere in a sustainable and responsible way by choosing from an array of fixed departure or private departure options. Their trips are also Zero Carbon.
- ☒ Travel & Volunteer or sign up for their Volunteer programs to get hands on in making a difference and have a life changing experience.
- ☒ For more details, you can write to them on discover@spiticosphere.com or visit their website www.spiticosphere.com

Things to do

- ☒ Ecosphere offers a versatile range of travel programs and experiences that integrate the various facets of Spiti and offer a unique and exclusive insight into the numerous mystical and hidden aspects of Spiti Valley.
- ☒ Ecosphere's unique travel programs showcase the beauty of Spiti while leaving no trace. Journeys that not only leave an everlasting impression on you, but are carefully designed to have a positive impact on the culture, environment and economy of Spiti Valley.
- ☒ Ecosphere's Volunteer Programs aim to transform volunteers from observers to insiders in Spitian life. Their programs create unforgettable and rewarding memories, while contributing to sustainable development, livelihoods, and the conservation of culture and nature in Spiti.



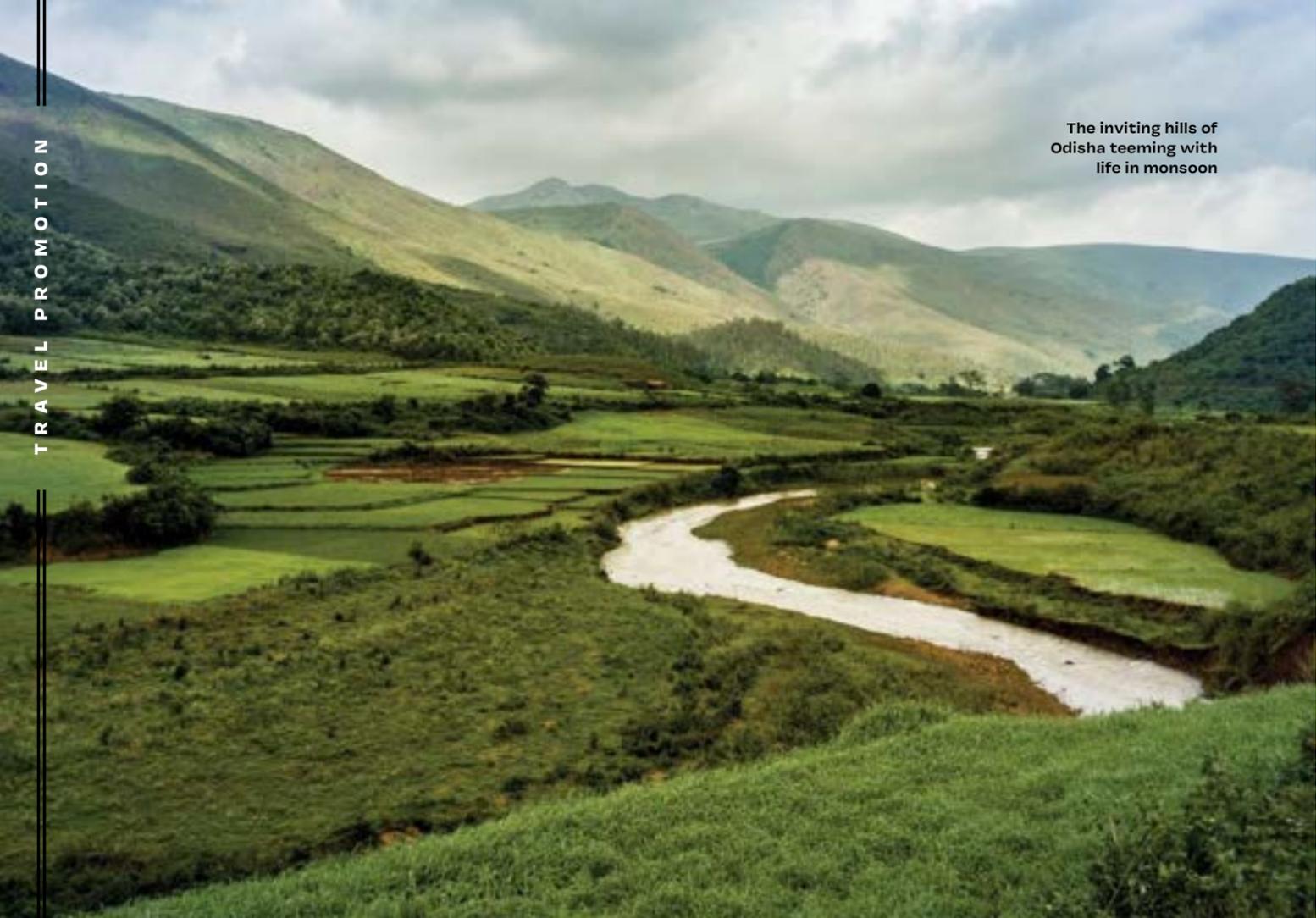
ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

CHHERING NORBU

has great experience in tourism, mountaineering, solar energy, hydrogeology, and medicinal plants among others. He belongs to a family of Amchis (traditional medicinal practitioners) and is one of the few remaining practicing Amchis in Spiti. He is also the life-force of Spiti Ecosphere managing day to day operations seamlessly.

Supported by-
Spiti Ecosphere





The inviting hills of Odisha teeming with life in monsoon

MEANDERING THROUGH QUAINTNESS

A sleepy town with a history sprinkled with stories of great kingdoms in the past, Koraput is wrapped in the soothing embrace of nature at its brilliant best! There's much to explore here.

Rustling through the forest expanse, the winds bring with them rustic charm that bathe you in the tender brilliance of Koraput — a tranquil town in the southern part of Odisha.

Absorbing the enchanting vistas, flowing with every bend of the road and celebrating every milestone that flashes past, Koraput is best explored on wheels. Road trips yield a sense of intimacy with

a place like nothing else can. Unwinding oneself with the winding roads, music filling up the air, and great companionship — it's an uplifting indulgence!

The perfectly paved blacktop that flow through the inviting landscapes in Koraput reveal the texture and vibe of the place. Journeying through roads — it lifts up the spirit, and offers great many learnings, too.

Koraput is a geographical gem. Historical studies suggest that it was a thriving region, abundantly rich in resources. It is among the most scenic and fulfilling places to explore in Odisha; tenderly encased by rich forests, vigorous waterfalls, terraced valleys and swift springs.

Spreading out a canvas of freshness with bright green landscape all around,

the beautifully inviting roads make Koraput easily accessible from most parts of Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. It is a part of the tribal belt in southern Odisha, with Gadaba, Diyadi Paroja, Saura, and Bhattadas being some of the major tribes.

Koraput offers a great balance between adventure and calmness, making it ideal for thrill seekers and families alike, and can be reached from Bhubaneswar via the enigmatic landscapes of Rayagada, and from Visakhapatnam via the Araku Valley. There are several immersive experiences that await you all across this beautiful land.

Deomali: Standing proudly tall at 1,672m, Deomali is the highest peak in Disha and is situated near Doodhari village. The peak surrounding the peak is rich in flora and fauna and has a thick layer of forest all around it. The Deomali hill range has rich reserves of minerals and is peppered with brooks and valleys. It is also home to tribes such as Kandhas, Bhumia, and Bhotias among others.

Duduma Waterfall: Located at the border of Koraput in Odisha and Vishakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, Duduma is a zestful waterfall that falls down a height of 175 metres and emerges out of the Machkund River. Duduma is also home to Bonda,



The Kolab Dam in Jeypore is built on Kolab River, a tributary of Godavari

Gadama, and Paraja aboriginal tribes. There is also a hydroelectric project located near the falls which has a capacity of 120MW.

Gupteswar Temple: Located at the banks of the Kolab River, it is an important shrine of Lord Shiva and is situated on a limestone hill. The temple's cave is massive and serves as the abode to Lord Shiva who sits there in form of a big 'lingam'. According to popular belief,

Lord Ram is supposed to have passed through this region enroute Panchabati in Dandakaranya.

Jeypore: Among the largest towns in the Koraput district, Jeypore has immense historic significance and was established by Maharaja Vir Vikram Dev of the Suryavanshi kingdom in the mid 17th century. Jeypore is enveloped by Eastern Ghats and Araku Hills on the three sides. It is encircled by an imposing old fort which is a big attraction for visitors. Odisha's largest man-made pond, Jagannath Sagar to the eastern part of the town, hosts water sports activities to indulge adventure seekers.

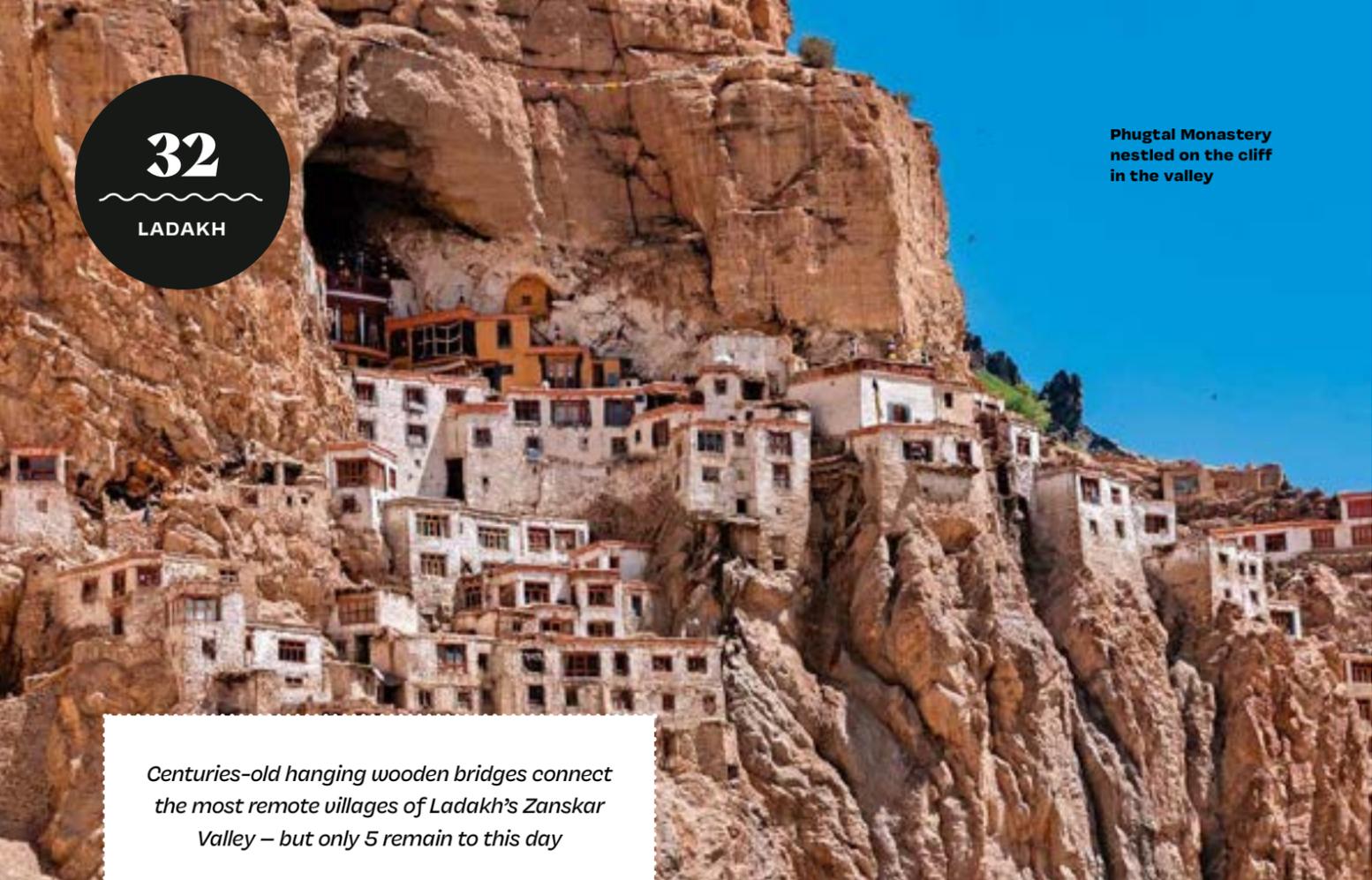
As you waft along the road and the wind glides over your skin — lifting your spirits, sending a gentle, refreshing shiver of excitement through your body — you're reminded that the meandering ribbons of black are not just to take you from one place to the other; they are the constant, eternal companions in the journeys that evolve you. Come, hit the road in Odisha and explore more such wonderful places, and yourself.



Mountain Peak View, Deomali

For more information, visit odishatourism.gov.in





Phugtal Monastery nestled on the cliff in the valley

Centuries-old hanging wooden bridges connect the most remote villages of Ladakh's Zaskar Valley – but only 5 remain to this day

THE HANGING LIFELINE OF Zaskar



A rudimentary bridge to cross the river

I STILL REMEMBER THAT EVENING.

My friend Stanzin and I had to cross the Tsetaan wooden bridge to reach Marling, the oldest hamlet of the Lungnak Valley of Zaskar, for an electrification project. It was already dark, and before us lay probably the longest wooden bridge of Zaskar, precariously hanging above the gushing Tsarap River!

By the time we reached the middle, it was nearly 10 pm. All we could hear were sounds of the water flowing swiftly and the wind lashing. Darkness fell all around us. The bridge had a lot of cracks, and the other side seemed too far away. Stanzin began panicking, thinking the bridge might be breaking. Eventually we retreated to the starting point to wait for sunlight. We spent the entire night outdoors, trying to survive without a roof or food.

The next morning, we walked across the

bridge, reached the village and slept for the entire day.

These hanging bridges are the lifeline of Zaskar. Since there are no big willows in Ladakh, the people of Zaskar built these indigenous structures by putting together small twigs and shrubs in a dense formation. They were made in the olden times, with no modern architectural techniques, but the bridges serve the villages well. Each one can last for decades, with villages on both sides of the river contributing to the maintenance effort every few years.

In 2015, in the Lungnak valley of Zaskar, the landslides and floods washed away all bridges except one. Now that wooden bridge, also above Tsarap River (which finally becomes Zaskar River), is the only lifeline that connects the grand old monastery of Phugtal with the village of Yougar on the other side. During the electrification of the monastery, I remember the tremendous effort made by the villagers and monks to get the solar panels and batteries transported across the bridge – perhaps the most risky in Zaskar due to its



A motorable bridge on the way from Kargil to Zaskar

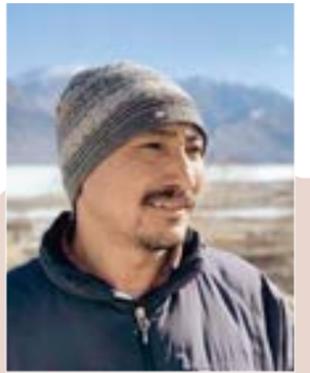
height – and to the top of the hill.

The most remote monastery and village in Zaskar now run entirely on their own solar power grid – only because the old hanging bridge made it possible to transfer materials across the roaring river.

Things are changing quickly though. The old hanging wooden bridges are now being replaced by motorable ones. Only five hanging wooden bridges remain in Zaskar, all of them in the Lungnak Valley.

The hanging wooden bridges might be old, shaky, and scary after dark, but they

always make for interesting memories. They are usable throughout the harsh winter, but interestingly no one uses them. The Tsarap River freezes over in winter and people do not need bridges to commute. They simply walk on the frozen river to get from one village to another. 📍



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

SHAKEER HUSSAIN hails from Leh. He is a middle school dropout but one of the sharpest technical brains. He is an innovator and scientist at heart. In addition to being a hands-on engineer, he can fix vehicles, build furniture and do plumbing. He is the happiest when given a technical problem on and off the field. He loves to design new machines, and discuss science and physics in his free time. He is very active and respected in his village social circle, and affectionately called “Rancho” (from the movie Three Idiots) by his friends!

Supported by- Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)



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How to Reach

Zaskar is the most unexplored area in entire Ladakh. There are three routes to reach there: Leh-Kargil-Zaskar, Manali-Darcha-Shinkula-Padum-Lingshed-Leh, and Leh-Wanla-Lingshed-Zangla-Padum.

What to do

The route offers innumerable activities which cannot be completed in a short journey. Here is a list of the activities:

- ☑ Explore Leh-Kargil route. You will find Indus-Zaskar confluence, Moon Land, Patthar Sahib gurudwara, Lamayuru Monastery, and

- the Maitreya Budha statue of Mulbekh
- ☑ Kargil war memorial
- ☑ You will cross the origin of the Tsuru River on this journey
- ☑ Glaciers Nun-Kun, Parkachik, Drang-Drung
- ☑ Penzi La
- ☑ Rangdum Monastery, a preserver of the history of the region

- ☑ Karsha Monastery, The old structure is situated on a hill, immediately before Padum. You can witness the breathtaking panoramic landscape view from the top
- ☑ Trek to Lungnak Valley
- ☑ Petroglyphs sites
- ☑ Phugtal Monastery, a 2500-year-old structure

How to get involved

- ☑ GHE has brought solar energy to more than 20 villages in the region through its impact expeditions, engaging hundreds of travellers in the process. You can join one of the impact expeditions that will empower you to leave behind a legacy of your visit in the valley. Join at www.ghe.co.in
- ☑ The team has also set up several homestays and has been able to stitch together authentic cultural experiences which can be booked at www.mountainhomestays.com



THE THRUST ENGINE OF RURAL INDIA

Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF) is an initiative by the Government of India that aims to empower the adivasi communities by means of collaboration with various state-owned and private organisations

Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF) was set up as an independent society through a Union Cabinet decision with the aim of upscaling civil society action in partnership with government for creating an Atma Nirbhar Adivasi Bharat by transforming the livelihoods and lives of people in the Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB). The CITB represents the most vulnerable and deprived areas of India, home to nearly 80% of India's total tribal population.

The partnerships that help BRLF to scale up are Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) at the grassroots, the State itself, Community Based Organisations, and Public and Private sector enterprises.

BRLF supports selected CSO partners by providing technical and financial support to improve the quality of their work and build their capacities.

Backing BRLF is a corpus of INR 500 crore from the Government of India, of which INR 200 crore has been received as the first tranche. The interest accrued from it is being used for its funding and facilitation activities.

Besides, BRLF is raising resources from Foundations, Corporates under CSR and other agencies.

The basic value proposition of BRLF lies in supporting PM's initiatives for livelihood security; doubling farmers' income; taking forward Non Pesticide Management (NPM) agriculture, a form of natural farming in line with the Bharatiya Prakritik Krishi Paddhati program; Participatory Groundwater Management as envisioned in the Atal Bhujal Yojana; innovations in improving rural livelihoods; value chain development for Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and crops; working in the most neglected regions and with Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups; building capacities of rural professionals; providing states a window for Non-Government Organization (NGO) partnership and transparency in support to NGOs. All of BRLF's work is completely aligned with most of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Towards meeting its goals, the total funds disbursed by BRLF since inception as grants to CSOs amounts to Rs.89.77 crores. As against

this investment, BRLF has mobilized Rs. 1,355.32 crores as leverage and co-finance. This represents a multiplier of 1:15, i.e., each rupee spent on BRLF's project translates to Rs.15 being mobilized and spent effectively. Through its partners, BRLF has so far managed to reach 6.54 lakh poor households in 8480 villages of 251 blocks in 86 districts of eight states in a short span of around five years. With its focus on women and adivasis, BRLF has reached out to 5.27 lakh women and 4.94 lakh Scheduled Tribe households through its implementing partners. Some key organisations that have been receiving funds and facilitation support from BRLF include PRADAN, SRIJAN, SEWA (Odisha), FES, and CINI among others.

Through support from BRLF, 53,773 women's self-help groups (SHGs) have been formed with 5,80,190 women members. BRLF funded projects have also promoted 134 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), which have a membership of 42,509 poor households.

NPM agriculture is a flagship intervention

of BRLF. So far, 121,411 farmers and 56,782 hectares of land have been brought under NPM.

BRLF is encouraging investments in the better management of natural resources, as water is key in the revival of the tribal rural economy. 17,198 water harvesting structures such as check dams, canals and farm ponds have been built in the past four years benefitting 2,34,194 poor households. Through land development activities, BRLF has reached out to 50,156 poor households and covered 55,848 hectares of land.

Besides funding standalone CSO projects, BRLF has forged major state level partnerships.

In 2017, the Springshed Rejuvenation program was launched in four districts of West Bengal in partnership with the Commissioner, MGNREGA, Govt of West Bengal. A total of 294 springs were treated at an expenditure of Rs. 9.37 crores, generating 291,180 person-days of employment. This was followed by Ushar Mukti ("freedom from barrenness", an MGNREGA-based mega-watershed program) in 55 blocks of 6 districts in West Bengal in partnership with the MGNREGA Cell of the state. A total MGNREGA and convergence leverage of Rs. 1070 crores has been achieved, creating 5.28 crore person-days of employment. BRLF also entered into a partnership with the Government of Chhattisgarh to implement a mega-watershed project in 26 blocks of 12 districts, co-created and co-financed with the Axis Bank Foundation. Under the project, an estimated 1,388 Micro-watersheds are being taken up for area treatment - checking soil erosion and runoff reduction over 6.94 lakh hectares of land. Projects worth Rs. 515.62 crores have already received administrative sanction, of which schemes worth Rs. 234.54 crores have been completed, creating more than 21 lakh person-days of employment.

Subsequently BRLF has forged a partnership with the Department of Horticulture and Odisha Livelihoods Mission for implementing the Agriculture Production Cluster project in 40 backward tribal blocks of Odisha, to ensure doubling of income of small and marginal farmers, especially women, by establishing



932 Producer Groups aggregated to form 30 Producer Companies (PCs) covering 101,575 households. Rs. 182.76 crores have been leveraged from the state government. BRLF has also signed an MoU with the Commissioner, MGNREGS, Govt of Jharkhand to implement a MGNREGA-based mega watershed project in 26 blocks of 6 districts of the state. The project is co-financed and co-created by Hindustan Unilever Foundation and Welthungerhilfe. BRLF expects that the leverage of government funds in these four states for programmatic expenses will be upwards of Rs.3,000 crores over the next 3 years and at least 6 lakh families will be impacted.

A truly exciting feature of these state partnerships is the capacity building of thousands of frontline state functionaries in the course of implementation.

A project funded by European Union is being implemented in about 279 villages of 4 blocks in 3 districts of Madhya Pradesh viz., Shivpuri, Sheopur and Guna and two blocks of two districts in Jharkhand viz., Latehar and Palamu to transform the lives and livelihoods of the particularly vulnerable tribal groups and Dalits of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. The project is working towards enhancing the quality of outcomes of the grassroots interventions in the areas of water and



clean energy in the wake of climate change, building capacities of CSOs in resource mobilization, advocacy and policy dialogue and driving innovations.

Under its Capacity Building vertical, to build young leadership, BRLF has begun grooming adivasi youth as development professionals through a one-of-a-kind, rigorous six-month Certificate Program in Rural Livelihoods (CPRL). The course is conducted in partnership with IIMR University, Jaipur and is a much-needed intervention at bridging the capacity gap at the grassroots. 146 adivasi youth, identified by our CSO partners as people with leadership potential, have completed this intensive 6-month, field-based course successfully in the first five batches. During the course, the candidates work with CSOs and CBOs for firsthand experience. BRLF has also sponsored 16 tribal youth to study MBA in Rural Management from IIMRU during the last three years. BRLF has entered into a partnership with Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society to build the capacities of their field staff.

The Research and Knowledge Management vertical of BRLF aims at becoming a knowledge hub for information on the tribal communities of the CITB. BRLF has initiated a Tribal Development Report (TDR) covering different themes on Human Development, Livelihoods, Language and Arts and Craft. In each section, there are a series of papers by academic and thematic experts. The report is expected to be published in 2021.

BRLF is committed to reaching 1.5 million adivasi households and showing measureable impact in their lives and incomes needs more hands and resources.

We are calling on private and public sector partners, foundations and grant making institutions to help us reach critical mass to overcome poverty in India's poorest adivasi districts. We urge all institutions, and the people of India to take philanthropy to newer, exciting themes and geographies by investing in sustainable tribal livelihoods, innovations and in grooming adivasi change makers.

FROM ANCIENT TO Future

NAWANG PHUNTSOG

I

WAS BORN INTO A SEMI-NOMADIC FAMILY

of herders in Teri village in the Changthang region. During my schooling I learnt about the cultural diversity of Changthang, which is also home to a nomadic tribe called the Changpas, who rear the famous Changthangi goats or the pashmina goats.

Sometime in 2003, I was selected for a crash course by the Ministry of Textile, in collaboration with Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. During the 15-day training we learnt about textile machinery and the super-fine cashmere. I soon realised that majorly raw pashmina was being exported but I believed we could also make handmade products.

In 2010, I left my job as a technician. My mother is from a nomadic family and to honour my heritage, I started my own venture – Nomadic Woollen Mills. My sole aim was to utilise all my learnings to create an ecosystem that offers employment to local artisans, besides creating beautiful pashmina products.

I began by training local women in pashmina spinning, knitting and weaving, organising designing and sizing so that we could

make products for commercial purposes. I started with a small shop and when business grew in 2016, I opened a new, bigger one.

A few years ago, I had promised to donate wool-shearing machines to the nomadic sheep-rearing families in the remote Samad Rockchan region. However, upon reaching there, I realised they had no access to electricity. I wanted to keep up my promise by giving them something useful and ended up donating solar lanterns to 69 families the next time.

I think it's time we find ways to develop a robust universe where nomads, weavers, craftsmen and locals flourish financially and creatively – and the rest of us remember our nomadic roots. 📌



➤ Nawang with his wife, Chorol, on their wedding day

➤ The exterior of the new shop in Leh

From creating local employment to donating solar lamps to nomads in a remote Ladakhi region, a 38-year-old semi-nomadic entrepreneur

www.voicesofruralindia.org



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

NAWANG PHUNTSOG

is passionate about nurturing and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Ladakh. He has a vision for creating a self-sustainable future for Ladakh in the pashmina handicrafts industry. A father to three naughty boys, playing with them takes up most of his free time. Whenever he gets a leisure window for himself, he mostly likes to engage in drawing

and gardening. Sometimes, weaving too.

Supported by -
Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)



➤ Nawang with his mother in Changthang



➤ Nawang with the Changpas and their goats



➤ The interiors of the new shop in Leh



NAWANG PHUNTSOG

➤ At the Maki Textile Japan's Workshop in Dehradun



38

KERALA

THE Walking LIBRARY

In the hilly Mothakkara village of Kerala's Wayanad district, a 63-year-old woman walks several kilometers every day for those who love to read but have no easy access to books

SHUTTERSTOCK

↳ Treasure
trove of books

F

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER,

reading has been one of my greatest joys. The way authors build a world through their writing and manage to capture a reader's imagination never fails to amaze me. I believe that reading stays in our minds far longer than what we see.

When I was a child, I would read all kinds of stories to my father, who loved listening to them. He did not get much of an education and therefore, couldn't read. I took it upon myself to read entire books to him and give him updates about events around the world by reading the news. I would write letters to our relatives and friends on my father's behalf, and then read them out loud so that he could check what I had written. That was perhaps how my love for reading began, and it grew with age.

It was the same love that made me choose the job of a 'walking librarian' at Pratibha Public Library – an offshoot of Library Movement in Kerala. The library was built in 1961 in my village Mothakkara, in the Mananthavady taluk of Kerala's Wayanad district. This region is home to beautiful rivers, small waterfalls, farms and a wide diversity of birds and plants, and is surrounded by lush green mountains.

Although the library has been around for almost 60 years, people in the village – women in particular – had no easy access to books until a few years ago. Despite their love for reading, their tight schedules, busy farming lives, and the distance and time to commute to the library made it difficult for them to visit regularly to borrow books.

Since

2012, WHEN I STARTED WORKING

at Pratibha Library, I have been delivering books to the homes of the library members six days a week. I give them two new books each time, collect them after eight days, and keep a record in the library register. I work based on the guidelines that the library council provides for book distribution and delivery.

By now, I have become familiar with the tastes of various members through continuous interaction. Every week, I look at the library's collection of books and try to find titles that would appeal to the members' tastes. The library has

over 11,000 books in the Malayalam, English and Hindi languages, and we currently have 102 members, including some senior citizens. I carry around 25 to 30 books every day – a mix of different genres – in a cloth shopping bag, so that members can select books of their choice. The cool weather in Wayanad makes it conducive for walking.

The ardent readers of my community now spend more time with books once they reach home from work. People who work outdoors, in the fields, also take books from me while I'm on my way to their houses. Now that people are no longer forced to restrict their reading to weekly magazines, they've started reading different genres regularly. My ability to create opportunities for them to read and bring smiles to their faces as they welcome books arriving at their home gives me great pleasure.

All these years, I have been delivering 500-550 books on an average per month. That changed with the pandemic in 2020, and the subsequent lockdown led to minimising its spread. I can no longer access all areas, as some have been declared containment zones. I am now able to deliver only 300-350 books in a month. Yet, it's been heartening to see the positive

effect that reading has had on some people amidst the chaos that the pandemic has brought along. Most members who were feeling stuck at home and low during the lockdown find peace through reading the books that I deliver to their homes.

During THIS PHASE,

I also started providing books to all the indigenous tribal children. It is a delight to see their excited faces when they see me with new books. Some children call me over the phone to confirm my next walk towards their houses.

Over time, I have developed strong bonds with all the reading members. Some give me wonderful reviews on books that they find interesting and urge me to read them. I note

I was recommended a book titled Adujeevitham and reading it inspired me to fight any adversity and never give up

down the titles of those books and make sure that I take them home next time. In a way, these members create opportunities for me to nurture my passion for reading. On a member's recommendation, I recently read a book titled 'Adujeevitham' by Benyamin. It impacted me deeply, and Najeeb – one of the characters in the book – will live forever in my mind, giving me strength and motivating me not to give up but fight in adverse situations.

I love everything about my job. It gives me an opportunity to expand my worldview by having interesting conversations and discussions about books every day. I love sharing books and daily life with people. My job has taught me the most important lesson of life – what you give is what you reap. I treat all the library members with affection and care, and I earn respect from all in return.

My EXPERIENCE AS A

librarian also helped me as a tourist guide, an additional role I took up in 2014. When I realised that I needed to learn more about a field that was completely new

➤ The hilly terrain of Wayanad is wonderfully green and rich



BRIAN RAPSEY, POSITIVE FOOTPRINTS- WORLD NOMADS



Empowerment through Education

Providing a new lease of life to the underprivileged community via means of education and livelihood, Literacy India is taking a step towards holistic development

A young Aditya, hailing originally from Basti in Uttar Pradesh, loves history and chess. His family of four moved to Gurugram a while ago, in the hope of a better future. His father, a low wage factory worker, supports the family financially. Recently, Aditya was featured in the papers for his above average IQ and along with two other classmates from Literacy India, has been selected by Indian Mensa to receive academic mentoring and to meet his full potential.

This is just one of the many stories of real change that Literacy India has brought about in the lives of underprivileged children. Understanding the significance of education early on, Literacy India was set up in 1996 as a non-profit organisation. With a motto to mainstream the marginalised, their focus is on the 4Es—education, employment, empowerment and environment.

In order to reach their goal, they work across over 100 centres in 15 states including Delhi, NCR, Haryana, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, and Telangana, and with an annual outreach of 65,000 beneficiaries.

Another inspiring story under the hat is that of Fulmoni, who lost her father at the age of four, and left behind her mother to shoulder the responsibility of their seven children. Due to lack of education none of them could attain a well-paying job and had a tough time making ends meet. It was in 2015 that Fulmoni

joined Literacy India's non-profit vocational training program in tailoring and since then there has been no looking back. Within a short span she learnt the craft and how to stitch various patterns. Her journey with Literacy India has not only helped her accomplish a new skill set, but also motivated her to bring her family out of their financial troubles. The resilient Fulmoni now aspires to become a successful artisan, work her way up through the financial troubles and uplift her family.

Realising and understanding, gradually, that real education is not just about posh schools, Literacy India's focus lies on holistic development, by combining classroom education and value education. The core ethos of their Vidyapeeth School is value education, which is then followed by sports, theatre in education; to become confident, and then vocational studies to teach students cooking, hardware, computer as well as electrical maintenance.

Literacy India's flagship initiative is an



enterprise called Indha that works on providing livelihood opportunities to rural women. Under this initiative, craft work of highly skilled artisans, who had been trained under the Indha project, can be seen at <https://indha.in/>.

Another program which is priming the adolescents and youth to be independent and bread earners is called Karigari. Through this initiative, skills like digital marketing, web development, and coding are taught. Under the same program, women are taught how to make rural crafts and there's great focus on promoting local culture and art forms like Chau dance, Patchitra art, and hand painting among others. Even vocational skills like mobile phone repairing, embroidery and electrical training are taught under this program. With social tourism on the rise, homestay in north Bengal serves as the perfect setting to experience cultural festivals like Indra Dhanush, and Literacy India has also helped in mobilising Mobile Ambulances in Jhalawar, Rajasthan and helps many small enterprises with soft loans for their endeavours.

With various other projects and innovations such Gurukul, Pathshala, and Gyantantra Digital Dost under their sleeve, their aim is to empower the underprivileged, by providing them access to value education and skills training and ultimately enabling them to earn a decent living.

Visit: www.literacyindia.org



↓ Recording details of books delivered to a member

KABANI



➤ Pratibha Library in the Mothakkara village

KABANI

to me, I extended my love for reading to travelogues, travel books and books about different destinations across the globe. The confidence that I gained by interacting with members of the library helped me in my interactions with guests from around the world. That, in turn, helped me improve my English.

Some people hesitate to take membership in our library as it costs them ₹25. Those who can afford the registration fee pay for themselves. But there are also

those who love to read but cannot afford the fee. I pay their registration fee from my earnings so that everyone with a passion for reading gets books to read.

Some members feel that I should be paid an additional amount for walking to their houses, but the excitement on the faces of readers when they see me with my books are my rewards. I feel very content that at 63 years of age, I am able to walk up to 4 kilometres every day, delivering books to people and being their 'walking library'. 📖



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

RADHAMANI K. P.

hails from the Mothakkara village in Kerala and is a frontier campaigner for sustainable community development programs in her village. She has profound knowledge of native medicinal plants and flora and is a biodiversity conservationist in her village. Radhamani also wears the cape of a 'travelling librarian', making books accessible to women and children in her village. She is also the President of the Panchayat-led women society group, Kudumbashree, and heads the organic farming group 'Pournima' which promotes organic farming in her village.

Supported by - Kabani



info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

Mothakkara is a hilly village located in the Wayanad district in the state of Kerala. Wayanad is part of the Western Ghats.

Nearest airports are Kannur at 86 km (2.5 hours by road) and Kozhikode (Calicut) at 107 km (3 hours by road).

The nearest railway station is at Kozhikode (Calicut). The town closest to Mothakkara is Mananthavady.

How to get involved

☑ Volunteer with Kabani to help in research, campaigns, community tourism initiatives, and technology programs.

☑ Support Kabani's sustainable community travel efforts by visiting Wayanad and joining the activities organized by Kabani.

For more details visit www.kabanitour.com

Things to do

☑ The Banasura dam and Banasura spice gardens are the main tourist attractions.

☑ Kabani has developed and trained a cluster of homestays, storytellers, and transporters in Mothakkara to promote sustainable community tourism. The activities that Kabani organizes give you an opportunity to enjoy the local culture and nature. These include a day-long walk in Wayanad through villages and paddy fields, a hike to Banasura hills, a visit to cake-making and Ayurvedic medicine-making units, and a visit to Athikkolli hamlet of indigenous tribe.



JAIPUR RUGS: WEAVING KNOTS OF COMPASSION

To express what is in one's heart sounds really simple, yet it is a complex pursuit. In the Hindi language, this desire of expression is defined aptly by the word — *Manchaha*. And much like the blend of simplicity and intricacy that this word represents, it is also an effort in the universe of sustainable development by the popular carpet manufacturer, Jaipur Rugs.

The *Manchaha* initiative isn't only about creating handmade rugs, it is about evincing the innocence of the rural people who make them, and the craftsmanship that hides behind each creation. Jaipur Rugs initiated this effort to tap into the endless and untamed creativity in rural India and gave the people a platform of creative expression and empowering them by telling their stories through the rugs they create.

Each of these rugs is handmade and has more than 200,000 knots — each knot telling the story of its maker one word at a time. One of the most celebrated rugs

is called *Machine ki Duniya*. It is weaver-designer Sundari's depiction — through unconventional motifs — of her desire to fly, as well as her gratitude to the farming machine that yielded greater harvest. Her rug was awarded the Carpet Design Award, 2021 for its incredibly unique design and concept, beating several big design houses.

For tourists and aficionados alike, Jaipur Rugs, along with airbnb, offers day-long excursions to the villages where you can learn the craft of weaving directly from the weavers. Looking at the detailing and intricacies that go in their work, and enjoying joyful conversations full of wisdom and inspiration is going to make you feel humbled. The barriers of language and culture fade away as you become part of their simple lives for a few hours.

WEAVING KNOTS OF REDEMPTION

After the success of the *Manchaha* initiative in rural Rajasthan, Jaipur Rugs is now bending bars and getting the

prisoners in Jaipur, Dausa and Bikaner Central Jails into its fold under the *Freedom Manchaha* program.

It is a livelihood opportunity for inmates which will encourage their creative expression, and healing. This initiative is not only about get trained in the art of carpet weaving making rugs. Through *Freedom Manchaha*, the intention is to turn disengaged inmates into creative individuals capable of making handmade works of art, thereby providing livelihood opportunities to them.

For Jaipur Rugs it is a way to give a sense of purpose to the inmates and the appreciation of their work stand proof that beauty can manifest from a place of gloom. Jaipur Rugs aims to create unique works of art by nurturing the latent creativity of the inmates, turning them into artists and creating a lasting and easily replicable solution.

Conceptualised by Kavita Chaudhary (Design Director, Jaipur Rugs), the *Manchaha* and *Freedom Manchaha* initiatives have won numerous prestigious global design awards such as the German Design Award, EDIDA (ELLE DECOR Design Award) Carpet Design Award, iF Design Award, Kyoorius Design Award and European Product Design Award, all while going up against mega design houses and billion-dollar product companies from across the globe.

REACHING FOR THE stars LITERALLY

A young astronomy enthusiast from a remote Ladakhi village shares how she is smashing gender stereotypes

↑ Star trail over the Pangong Tso

I

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN CURIOUS ABOUT THE STARS

Growing up, our elders narrated beautiful stories about the Pole Star and his children. Losar, the Ladakhi New Year, is also a festival associated with the stars.

My village, Maan, on the shores of Pangong Lake in Ladakh, is a special place for stargazing, free of clouds, light or air pollution.

Growing up I learned that women in our village take care of household chores, work on the farm, raise children and weave handicrafts. Men usually go to Leh and other towns to work as guides or travel agents. So as a woman, I had two options – to get married or engage in labour intensive work.

I wanted to be independent but there was no visible path. Keen to have a better life, I continued to study, hoping to find my own journey.

They say fortune favours the brave and the stars aligned for me one eventful day, when I was selected among several other women, for an astronomy training session by the scientists of the International Astronomical Union.

After all these years of hearing stories of



↻ Astronomy training in progress



↗ Preparing for a stargazing session

the stars I was excited to be trained in the basics of astronomy, the technicalities of operating a telescope and interacting with travellers. I was thrilled to hear that the first telescope of the project would be installed in my village.

Since then, our group of five women have been conducting stargazing sessions every night on the shores of Pangong Lake. On a regular night in Ladakh, we can see constellations like the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia, and the Pole Star. Sometimes we can also spot the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, zoom into the craters of Earth's moon and identify numerous other stars and constellations. During the sessions, we like to share stories about the stars that we heard growing up.

We try to learn continuously and keep our knowledge up to date. Our supporting

partners share documents, websites and practical applications for us to expand our knowledge of the night sky.

We now also have a network of homestays called Astrostays through which we have found employment – a steady source of income and a path towards independence.

Today when I look at young girls in my village, I realise how things have changed for the better. Girls have now started attending school regularly. Whether in astronomy or other fields, I hope that one day, the stars will align for them too. 📍



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

STANZIN DOLKAR

is a resident of Maan village, where she is part of the astronomy team. She completed her primary education till 5th grade in Maan, then moved to a nearby hostel till 10th grade. She is currently pursuing her 11th grade from IGNOU. Dolkar loves to sing and dance to local Ladakhi music. She is also known as the knitting expert in her village.

Supported by - Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)



info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

Maan is a hamlet on the shores of the Pangong Lake, Ladakh. It falls under Changthang region. There are two ways to reach Maan – either by crossing the world's second highest motorable pass, Chang La, or via Shayok if you are coming from Nubra.

The nearest airport is Leh which is well connected with Delhi. Alternatively, you can also travel by road to Leh via either Manali or Srinagar.

How to get involved

Simply book an experience or homestay through GHE's Mountain Homestays initiative. You can book the Astrostays and the Astronomy experience. The homestays at Maan are carbon neutral and your stay at Maan will be eco-friendly. You will find the astro team on ground explaining the constellations and planetary positions during their sessions at night.

Support the initiative by booking your travel at www.mountainhomestays.com

Things to do

The village is located on the shores of the Pangong Lake and is the world's first community run astro-village.

- ☒ Stargazing through a 10" telescope
- ☒ Hike to a hidden lake
- ☒ Yoga at Pangong, archery
- ☒ Buy authentic yak wool carpet
- ☒ Understand the impact of climate change by locals
- ☒ Trail through Merak-Chushul-Hanle-Tsomoriri

46

LADAKH

Beautiful
starry night sky
in Ladakh shows
the Milky Way

JOURNEY FROM Darkness TO Light

A young girl from Sumda Chenmo, a remote village in Ladakh's Markha region, shares her journey from growing up without electricity to solar-electrifying over 50 such villages

SHUTTERSTOCK

I

REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME

I saw a light bulb on a trip to Leh – I was 11, and drawn towards it like a moth. In its milky brightness, some of the biggest challenges of our daily lives back home suddenly seemed surmountable. What if we, too, had bulbs in our village? What if we could defy the darkness, and stretch the day, long after the sun had slid behind the coppery mountains of the Markha Valley? Growing up our lives were deeply interwoven with nature. We lived in harmony with wild animals in the Ladakhi countryside, and our days revolved around the sun, getting shorter during winters. A typical day started early with household

chores, followed by school and farming. We rushed from school to help our parents on the farm, then home to complete our homework and even cook before sundown. None of us were allowed to step out after dark, of course, as it was the turn of the animals to roam free and stake their claim to the valley.

For mountain communities, education comes at a price. We don't have even the basic infrastructure and facilities like electricity, water, and a sturdy roof. In a remote village like ours, it's a luxury to find a school with permanent teachers, forget about computers, internet or high-tech classes. So, after completing my primary education in the village, I had to move to Leh to study further.

I was always interested in science, which has stood me in good stead over the years, eventually supporting my quest to help the community. At the time, however, I had no

intentions of enrolling for higher studies, even though I wanted an independent life. I couldn't get the jobs I wanted, and a couple of years later, I got married. But the idea of being independent never left me and my plans materialised after my second child was born.

It

WAS AN UNEXPECTED

turn of events that led me to Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE), and to a career in clean energy access. My brother, who was a part of the organisation already, told me about the opportunity to train as a solar engineer. The first hurdle though, was to attend a six-month-long training programme in Rajasthan. I was nervous about leaving my family behind and travelling to a new place with unfamiliar language and food. But my husband encouraged me to take the plunge. Eventually, the fear of uncertainty gave way to dreams and I got going.

I was at the Barefoot College in Tilonia and the first month was tough thanks to the soaring temperatures and spicy food. It was here that I held a screwdriver in my hand for the very first time, and soon learnt how to repair LED bulbs, charge controllers and solar lanterns. Later, I also picked up more information on solar panels and batteries. Apart from the technical knowhow, we also learnt the basics of finance, weaving techniques and soft skills at Barefoot that I've put to good use ever since.

I joined GHE after I returned to Leh from Rajasthan, and soon after, I headed out for my very first assignment with my colleague, Achen, to electrify the sacred Lingshed monastery in Leh District, which is nearly 1,000 years old, and 97 households in its adjacent village. The Head Lama told us that he was pleased to see Ladakhi women setting an example for others to follow.

It feels great when women of my own community consider me a role model. It makes me aware of my responsibilities.

Next was GHE's first project beyond the borders of Ladakh. It was also the first time I was travelling alone to a place as far away as Meghalaya.

After landing at the airport in Guwahati, we drove to Garo Hills, winding our way



↗ Angmo electrifying the Markha Monastery
↘ She lights a fire for her new friends in Meghalaya

GLOBAL HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION



GLOBAL HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION



↗ Angmo would go on to electrify villages near the Pangong Tso

ASHWINI CHAUDHARY

up right into the clouds. We stayed in the villages of Rongmegré and Rongroasingré, and electrified more than 50 households. The trip was quite an adventure for me. Right from the landscape and the climate to the language and food, everything was completely unfamiliar. But I soon realised that all villages in India have at least one thing in common – its people are full of gratitude and warmth for visitors.

There is another big perk of my assignments – financial independence. I think it's very important for women to earn. It boosts confidence, and helps support our families in achieving their dreams. I remember buying an earthen lamp for the temple in our house and some clothes for my kids with my first pay cheque. So far, I have contributed to the construction of our house and to my

children's education. They study in one of the best schools in Ladakh, where they don't have to worry about permanent teachers, or about leaving home for higher education. And to me that counts for a lot.

I

HAVE COME

a long way from living in the dark to setting up solar microgrids in remote villages, and I hope to keep going. I also hope other women in rural areas have a journey as beautiful as mine. To them I'd like to say, "Start small. Don't wait for a big break or a government job. Instead, learn solar engineering, handicrafts, or any other skills you can. And in the end, do what you can, with what you have, from where you are." 🌱



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

GURMET ANGMO

is from the Markha region of Ladakh. She is a solar engineer, entrepreneur and mother. Her dream is to work for the upliftment of the Himalayan community. She has electrified more than 50 villages in Ladakh and Meghalaya with the Global Himalayan Expedition. She is a strong advocate of women empowerment and likes to lead from the front. She lives with her husband and two young daughters. Gurmet wants them to acquire the necessary skills through education to serve the rural community.

Supported by - Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)



info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

Markha Valley: Markha valley is known for the famous Hemis National Park. The Park is home to very rich and rare biodiversity including the world-famous Snow Leopard. The nearest airport is Leh which is connected well by Delhi. Alternatively, you can reach Leh by road from Manali or Srinagar
Lingshed Village: Reaching Lingshed village via Walna from Leh is a 6-7 hour journey by road. You may also choose to trek to Lingshed from a junction point at Leh-Kargil highway.

How to get involved

GHE has electrified several villages in the Markha valley and created livelihood opportunities through tourism for the villages in the region. The team has also setup boutique homestays which can be accessed through trained guides in the region, who will give you a great experience of local culture and the wildlife.

Incase you would like to be part of one of the electrification expeditions, visit www.ghe.co.in.

The team has also setup village experiences in this virgin and unexplored region of Ladakh and you book them at www.mountainhomestays.com

Things to do

Markha valley is a beautiful trek route around the Hemis National Park. Here is a list of things to be done on the route

- ☒ Explore the wildlife, stay in one of the villages adjacent to the park and hire a local guide to take you around
- ☒ Visit the copper artisan's village
- ☒ Visit Sumda-Chun Monastery, a 600-year-old structure
- Lingshed is a hidden gem in Ladakh. It is known for the 1000-year-old Lingshed monastery. One can:
 - ☒ Pray with the monks at Lingshed Monastery
 - ☒ Visit the Photoksar village
 - ☒ Visit the Singge La (Pass)



LEELA BORDIA'S JOURNEY WITH JAIPUR BLUE POTTERY

CRAFT IN INDIA

Craftsmen are the backbone of India's rural economy. Historically, crafts have held a special patronage in India. However, rapid industrialisation has slowly led to people pursuing alternative job opportunities to enhance their economic conditions. Indian craftsmen face many challenges in the face of modernization. A majority of craftsmen continue to operate in informal settings, have poor exposure to market intelligence, lack education and struggle to operate in the fragmented value chain.

In the face of such adversity, Leela Bordia emerged as a pioneer and mentor leading many village craftsmen towards entrepreneurial transformation. Her continual efforts not only resuscitated the craft of Blue Pottery in Rajasthan but also altered the fortunes of hundreds of villagers. She single-handedly brought prosperity and a sense of pride in craft to the craftsmen.

PASSION FOR CHANGE

Inspired by her mother's work with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, Mrs. Bordia set out in search of an opportunity that would help her make a change in society by helping those in need. In 1976, she visited a settlement of craftsmen in Jaipur and was shocked to see their poor living conditions. She found a few workers huddled in a room working on traditional blue pottery

and was amazed to discover that their work was intricate, eye-catching and rich. Most of these craftsmen belonged to the villages around Jaipur and had migrated to the city in search of employment, ending up living in squalor and isolation from their families and community. Mrs. Bordia decided that this was the opportunity she had been looking for and decided that she would make the craft of blue pottery a medium of bettering lives and creating a sustainable livelihood for its craftsmen. Not wanting to simply dole out money, she saw an opportunity here to give the artisans themselves the power to earn their own livelihood.

CREATING CRAFT ENTREPRENEURS

Mrs. Bordia said: "I pursued my passion for blue pottery and simultaneously searched for avenues to benefit not only this exquisite craft but also the craftsmen. It was not me that chose this craft but the craft itself that chose me to be its voice". This journey began with one craftsman and one product and from there more and more craftsmen began to discover the true value of their work and started to join hands with her.

The first change that Mrs. Bordia made was to set up production units in the villages. In the beginning this was a difficult task as the craftsmen did not believe that working from their villages could provide them with a

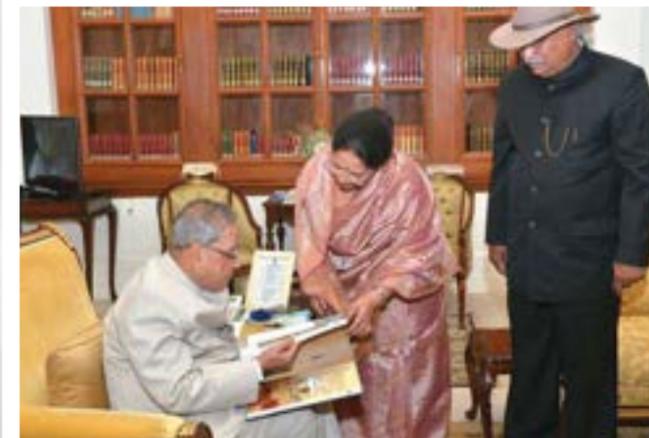


LEELA BORDIA
Founder,
Jaipur Blue Pottery

substantial enough income. However, with time they began to realise the benefits of her vision. By going back to the villages, they were able to not only make pottery but also farm their land and teach their skill to their families and communities so as to become self-reliant craft entrepreneurs. Aside from helping avoid needless nomadic labour in the cities and displacement of people, self-reliant units also helped preserve the traditions and culture of the villages and contribute to the overall development of the area. Today, these villages have an effective infrastructure with schools, hospitals and basic amenities, all developed through the efforts of the craftsmen that live and work there.

INNOVATION IN THE CRAFT: UTILITY FROM ART

Neerja International was born out of necessity. A means to an end, the company was created to provide a platform for the craftsmen of blue pottery to be able to showcase and sell



their work. Very early on, Mrs. Bordia realised that the traditional products created from blue pottery were beautiful art objects with no real-life applications. "If art is only used for beautification, and no utility is derived from it, fewer pieces will be made. How will the craft survive?" says Mrs. Bordia. Often criticised for the change in colours that she brought about, she did not lose heart and only thought about what would benefit the craft and its people. She encouraged the craftsmen to innovate with blue pottery to create everyday utility products. Despite their initial hesitation, the craftsmen learnt to innovate and work beyond the limitations of traditional blue pottery items like vases and bowls, to bring about a twist to appeal to the modern masses. Once they were made to realise the value of blue pottery in the modern market, they began creating utility objects like beads, pen holders, door knobs, tiles, to name a few. The growth of Neerja International is synonymous with the growth of the craftsmen it engages. Presently, the company produces over 500 different items, each with hundreds of different design variations using traditional and adapted blue pottery techniques.

WFH AND THE COVID19 PANDEMIC - WORK FROM HOME IS NOTHING NEW FOR NEERJA

Today the company under able guidance of Mrs. Bordia and her family, continues to work with over 1000 craftsmen and affiliated artists either directly or indirectly. Neerja International works with specially-abled persons who are gainfully employed with the organisation after being trained in the craft of blue pottery and also provides a source of financial independence to women. One example of this is the women of the 'Patwa' community in Rajasthan. All the

weaving and threadwork for the jewellery collections made at Neerja are done by the women from this traditional community who have been trained in this skill and can now be gainfully employed and earn a living from within their homes and family units.

Artisans working with Mrs. Bordia's company work in their home villages which helps avoid displacement of labour. Their work is contractual. They deliver the finished products to the central office in Jaipur upon completion. An example of the power of self-reliance that Mrs. Bordia has imbibed in her team is the way that the craftsmen of blue pottery and the company itself have dealt with the Covid19 pandemic in the last two years. During a global phenomenon like Corona, where industries were forced to come to a standstill, Neerja International only shut its doors for the first mandatory lockdown in India in 2020. Post which, the company which has been a pioneer of what is today being recognized the world over as the New Norm of Work-From-Home continued to keep its craftsmen busy and engaged. Saving livelihoods and continuing essential activities like research and development on important aspects of blue pottery like the strengthening of the ceramic, the company continued to support the artists working with them by ensuring that orders kept coming in and new innovations were made during this period. On an average, at least one new product per day was being designed by the company during this period. This helped keep everyone busy and their spirits up. Idle hands and idle minds can lead to anxiety and depression. At Neerja, this was avoided so that every craftsman and every member of the Neerja family stayed employed, productive and positive.

Another great advantage of self-reliant units is that handmade crafts like blue pottery are labour intensive and time consuming. Therefore, working in a self-reliant unit gives the craftsmen the freedom to decide how much work they wish to undertake and allows them the ability to be in control of the income they can generate. Also, more and more young people are encouraged to pursue the craft when employment becomes available in their home towns and villages.

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

Mrs. Leela Bordia is the first Indian lady ceramist to write a book on blue pottery titled - A Tribute to Blue Pottery. She presented the first copy of this work to Late Shree Pranab Mukherjee (then President of India)

Her work has been an inspiration for many and she features as a case study in the publication 'Business in Asia' and in author Rashmi Bansal's book, 'Follow Every Rainbow', a popular read. NCERT has also incorporated a chapter about her work in their syllabus on Entrepreneurship.

Her wall is decorated with the awards she has received but what gives her the most satisfaction is overcoming the challenges that blue pottery throws in her way, like making the biggest blue pottery plate in the world, a record registered in Limca Book of Records.

Keeping the craft of blue pottery alive is her dream today as much as it was in 1976. It is her ardent wish that more and more people talk about blue pottery and what makes her happiest is when people refer to this craft as Jaipur Blue Pottery. That to her is the very best accolade.

LOSING THEIR Depth?

52
UTTARAKHAND

A guide from Shankhdhura village visually documents the intricate craft of Likhai (wood carving), which was once found abundantly in villages across Kumaon

www.voicesofruralindia.org

A traditional window frame in a 50-year-old house in the village



⌘ Wood carved utensils for food storage

O

OWING TO COVID-19

tourism in our village, Shankhdhura, came to a sudden halt. I worked as a high-altitude trekking and birding guide, so the income I earned to run my house also suddenly dried up.

We have been engaged with tourism and homestays in our village for the past 16 years. For the past year and a half, we have been retrofitting these homestays with wood carvings through Shilp Studio, a collaborative project between Himal Prakriti and IIT Rourkee.

The doors and windows in our village are made in the traditional style, with wood carvings on them. I always wondered about their creation. It was only recently that I got the chance to learn about Hindi *likhai* – the craft of wood carving.

Wood from the *akhrot* (walnut) tree is preferred for carving as it is dense and has a fine grain that suitable for minute designs. Upon



⌘ Carved wooden boxes

↓ Result of learning basic wood carving skills



⌘ *Mor pithak*, a traditional artifact

drying it also takes on a dark and beautiful colour. Walnut *likhai* was earlier done by the master craftsmen of the *Oar* community. Once the design is carved onto the wood, it has to be further refined using sandpaper, to give it a smooth finish. The carved wood panels are then nailed onto the existing frame of doorways. Today, most of our homestays have beautiful *likhai* carved wood panelling added to their doorways.

And now our local artisans are capable of keeping the old designs alive in this region. 📍



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

TRILOK SINGH RANA

Like all able bodied young men, he grew up dreaming of joining the army. In 2008, he went on his first high altitude trek as a crew member of a Himalayan Ark trek and never looked back. From hunting birds with the village boys till he was 14, he is now a respected bird guide of Uttarakhand. He sees himself grow old, exploring and photographing these grand mountains and the wildlife they nurture.

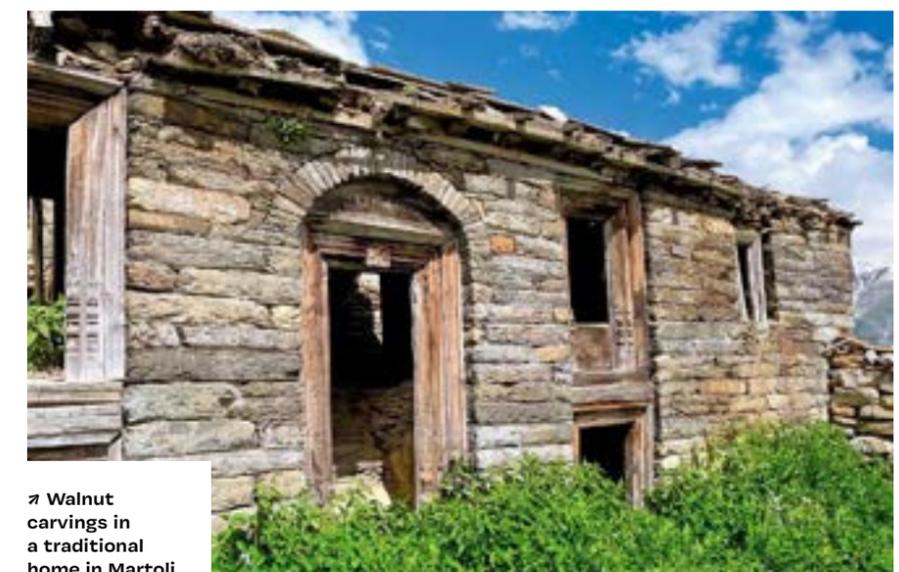
Supported by - Himalayan Ark



⌘ Traditional Likhai design for a door frame



⌘ Details of the intricate design



⌘ Walnut carvings in a traditional home in Martoli

FORBIDDEN Forests

A social worker from Meghalaya's Chiringmagre village shares how ancient traditions and tribal culture helped preserve a pristine patch of biodiversity



↓ Forests are an integral part of the daily lives of locals

↑ The dense, lush forests of South Garo hills in Meghalaya

↓ Rare plants continue to thrive in the sacred forest



GLOBAL HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION

SHUTTERSTOCK

T

TO REACH THE SMALL VILLAGE OF

Chiringmagre in Meghalaya's South Garo Hills where I live, one has to endure slow and gruelling progress on foot for six hours crossing a river and a jungle. The path skirts around the densest area of the woods – a section that is sacred to us. The sacred forest is called A'song Kosi.

This is a special place. Outsiders are forbidden from entering the sacred forest and no one, not even a member of our tribe, can cause any harm to the trees, flowers, or animals here. It has been this way for as long as I can remember, and my forefathers before that. Like any ancient tradition, this, too, has a story behind it.

The ancient indigenous Garo people had faith in one supreme spirit – one who is the creator of all the universe and the preserver of all living beings. It is believed that man is unworthy of calling him by his name, so he is known by his manifestations and work. He's called Kalkame. The Garo people offer a sacrifice to him once a year, thanking him for his work and praying for his

continued protection.

According to traditions, the place where the sacrifice is offered is the sacred forest. It is strongly believed that if anyone causes harm to any living being here, they will get sick, so nobody harms that part of the jungle in any way.

Chiringmagre's sacred forest was established in the 17th century when Shri Wanding Ch. Marak, his wife Mejing M. Sangma, and the villagers who bought our village land offered the first sacrifice here. It is situated about 10 kilometres from Chokpot Block in south Garo Hills district, west of Rongmegre village, and covers an area of ninety seven *bighas*.

The practice of offering sacrifices continued till 1989, when it was stopped as most members of our tribe converted to Christianity. Though we no longer offer sacrifices to Kalkame, we have continued to preserve the forest as a village tradition. A variety of birds, animals, insects, and over a thousand varieties of trees (even those with medicinal properties) and plants bearing wild fruits are found in the sacred forest.

One sentiment that all tribes have in common is the respect for nature.

In our tribe, the elders make decisions for the community and we all abide by them. The forest is our inherited wealth, and everyone in the village must follow the rules

made for its protection or face penalties. Lastly, I also try to conduct programs to inform the people of my village about global warming, the impact of cutting trees, and the need to preserve our biodiversity.

Our tribe has created a village group, which I preside over, to maintain and protect this reserve. We want to look after the forest so it can be a home for a variety of animals, birds and plants. The forest is also our water catchment area that helps us ensure that we will have resources for the future. This way we can also preserve the stone monuments that were erected here by our forefathers.

Our tribes live in the forest and understand the value of using its resources wisely as our survival depends on it. I believe that ancient traditions can play a huge role in designing modern sustainability practices. From them, we can learn to live in harmony with nature. 🌿



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

WITERSON M. SANGMA

is a social worker, teacher and Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE) project manager for village development projects in Meghalaya. His father was a farmer and he was the second of five children and grew up in poverty. He believes that God has a plan for each one of us, and it was his plan that a child with no money for books would grow up to become a headmaster in a college. And that a person who had no electricity in his own village has now helped to electrify 20 villages in the state.

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How to get there

The forbidden forests and the villages are located across the region of Garo Hills in Meghalaya. By road, the town of Tura is about 6 hours from Guwahati and 8 hours from Shillong. It will take another couple of hours to reach the villages located near the famous Nokrek National Park.

Nearest airports are Guwahati and Shillong

How to get involved

GHE has led several development interventions in the Garo region and is also now looking at setting up homestays in the popular villages near the Nokrek National Park. If you would like to get involved, connect with them at www.ghe.co.in and the team will get in touch with you to explore possible impact and volunteer opportunities. The vision is to leverage sustainable tourism as a force for development for these communities living in the most beautiful environments.

Things to do

Depending upon your starting point, multiple activities can be planned on the route. You can spend a day or two at Tura and climb the Tura Peak as well. There are multiple trekking routes which pass through jungles before you reach any of the villages. Once in the village, you can enjoy the days in a bamboo hut, eat local meals, learn traditional farming, explore the tribal culture and even buy handicrafts designed by the local women. A visit to the sacred forests is a must.

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GUJARAT

THE Abobe OF Snakes

A guide from the Dang tribe of Baradpani village in Gujarat shares how a snake tried to save his life, and why he feels responsible for protecting the species

SHUTTERSTOCK

↳ Flying snake
found in the Dang
region of Gujarat

I

IT WAS AN AFTERNOON

unlike any other. After completing the work at our farm, my wife and I headed to the forest adjoining our village – Baradpani – to forage for wild vegetables. Midway we saw a King Cobra blocking our path. It was staring at us and didn't want us going any further.

Snake sightings are not unusual in our village. Our ancestors have worshipped nature and its creations for a long time, including the *Naag Devta* (the Snake God). Neither were we startled nor wanted to hurt the cobra. We tried to shoo it away, but it didn't budge. Generally it's enough to make a snake slither away, so we wondered why it wasn't moving out of our way.

We, the Dang people, believe that snakes can sense danger, and maybe it lurked ahead, we wondered. But getting vegetables from the forest was essential, so we bowed to the cobra and took a different path towards the forest. In the woods, walking in search of the vegetables, we were oblivious to the likelihood of any danger.

Suddenly, the unmistakable roar of a leopard tensed up the air. We didn't see it, but it must have seen us, or heard our voices, and probably roared to protect itself. Fearing that it might attack us, my wife and I ran back to a safer place.

That's when we realized that *Naag Devta* – the cobra – had tried to stop us from going into the forest that day. It was perhaps warning us of the danger ahead, which we chose to ignore.

I grew UP IN THE

hilly forest terrain of Baradpani village in the Dang district in the southern part of Gujarat. Here we consider the *Surya Dev* (Sun God), *Chandra Dev* (Moon God), *Naag Devta* (Snake God), *Bagh Devta* (Tiger God) and other natural creations sacred.

The importance of *Naag Devta* is unparalleled and the well-known hill station, Saputara, just a few kilometres

away from my village, has been named after the snake deity.

Winter temperatures here drop to 3-5 degrees celsius, leading to chilly, misty mornings. During monsoons the whole place comes alive in different shades of green. Rice, wheat, millet, lentils, soybeans, etc. are cultivated here. Saputara makes us forget all our troubles and we only savour the beauty of this place.

As a child, I heard from our elders that there was a small village named Thaana in this region which was part of the state of Maharashtra. The river Sarp Ganga flowed through the village. One day some King Cobras slithered along the banks of the river and one of them stopped over a stone. It is believed that an impression of the snake was created on that stone and the village thereafter became known as Saap Utaara (which means impression of a snake). Time went on, and the name Saap Utaara got distorted to Saputara.

On the day of Naag Panchmi, the Dang people make small idols of snakes using the soil in their fields



MANAV PICTOGRAPHY

The stone where the snake left an impression is our shrine. On the day of *Naag Panchami*, one of the oldest festivals in our community, the Dang people make small idols of snakes using the soil in their fields. In Saputara and other parts of Dang, snakes are worshipped because they are regarded as the embodiment of the deity Shiva. This is an ancient tribal ritual that dates back centuries.

There are many varieties of snakes still found in-and-around Saputara, including rat snakes, pit vipers and cobras. When a snake is spotted, an official at the local zoo is informed, who carefully



GRASSROUTES

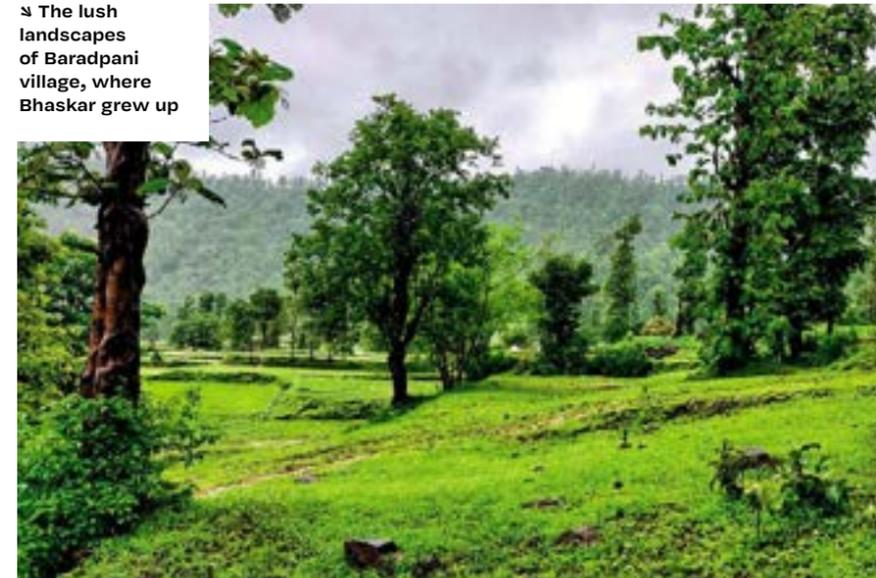
Life is peaceful in Baradpani village

catches the reptile and releases it in the jungle. However, the fear of snakes has been growing in Saputara. When a snake accidentally enters a house, sometimes it is killed mercilessly.

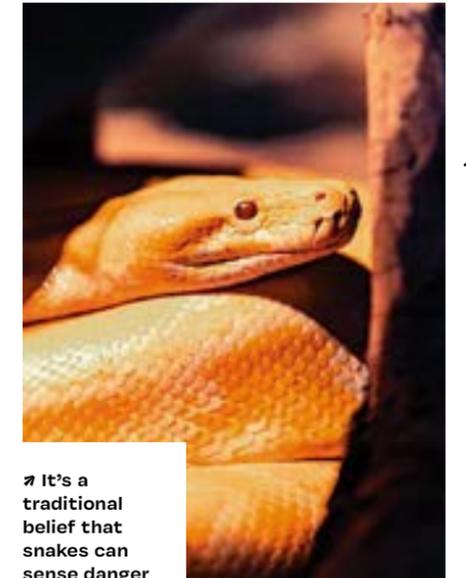
The DANG COMMUNITY

has traditionally worshipped snakes and therefore never hurt them. Unfortunately, these days snakes aren't valued as much as before. Neither the listeners nor the storytellers are interested. Due to this lack

The lush landscapes of Baradpani village, where Bhaskar grew up



RAHUL JOSHI



It's a traditional belief that snakes can sense danger

ALLEN LEE

of awareness, some people get very scared if they see a snake. They believe that if a snake sees you once, it will come to your home to kill you.

In an effort to eliminate this fear from the minds of people, Grassroutes conducted

a training about the different types of venomous and non-venomous snakes in the region, and the need to protect them. I attended the training and use my learnings from it to spread awareness among the tourists visiting this area.

Personally, I feel that snakes are our friends. They safeguard our crops by hunting rats, and in situations of adversity, they show up to protect us – like that day in the forest. In turn, we are responsible for protecting them.

info DESK

About Baradpani: It is a hamlet in Dang Taluka in Dang District of Gujarat. It comes under Baradpani Panchayat. The local language of the region is Gujarati. About 1.84 sq.km (56%) of the total village's area is covered by forest.

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

By Rail : Nearest rail station - Vandsa, Navsari - About 45kms from Baradpani
Nasik Road - About 80kms from Baradpani

By Air : Nearest Airport, Gandhinagar Airport - About 77kms from Baradpani

By Road : Nearest Highway is Surat-Nasik National Highway

How to get involved

Volunteering with AKRSP, an NGO predominantly working in the region, or Grassroutes Journeys Pvt Ltd which is mainly responsible for setting up the rural tourism project in research, marketing, campaigns, community tourism initiatives, and technology programs for the villagers.

Supporting the eco-tourism initiative by visiting the village as a tourist will also help to enhance the livelihood of the villagers.

For more details, visit www.grassroutes.co.in.

Things to do

Baradpani boasts of a successful eco-tourism project which helps one to experience rural life in its purest and native form. The tourists go through activities that a villager does on a daily basis - preparing food the traditional way and farming in the fields. Tourists also get a chance to interact with the villagers over a cup of local chai or play local games with the children of the village.

Attractions around Baradpani: Gira Falls, Botanical Garden, Unai Mata temple and Hot Springs, Vanil Udyog, Vandsa National Park

Shopping: - Local artisans make wares like big sized bamboo lamps, kangaroos, deer fashioned out of Bamboo roots and chips which are unique to this region and not found anywhere else.



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

BHASKAR NARAYAN DALVI

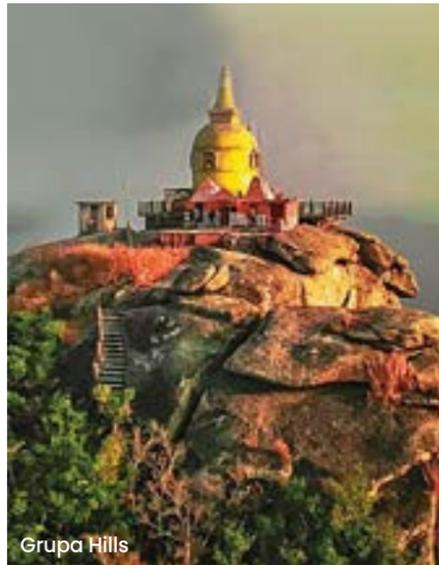
hails from Baradpani village in Gujarat. He is a member of the indigenous Dang tribe and holds a Bachelor's degree in Arts. He is the head guide and supervisor for a rural tourism project in Baradpani village. Also a farmer, Bhaskar specialises in cultivation of mushrooms and making lemongrass tea bags.

Supported by - Grassroutes Journeys



Of Culture & Unexplored Lands

Home to various indigenous art forms, Bihar today attracts travellers, art enthusiasts and patrons alike



Grupa Hills

Bihar has been a cultural, spiritual and travel hub for a long time. It is home to various art forms and unexplored naturalscapes, and attracts enthusiasts and explorers alike.

Many indigenous art forms, like Manjusha, Madhubani, Tikuli amongst others, exhibit rich cultural lineage, and their knowledge have been passed on from generation to generation.

MANJUSHA

They are traditional temple shaped boxes, generally made of bamboo, jute and paper. The art form was on the verge of extinction in the 1980s, but was revived by the state government and was widely publicised, making it on travellers' and art lovers' bucket list.

MADHUBANI

Capturing geometrical patterns, artists use fingers, twigs, matchsticks, natural dyes and pigments to create these vibrant masterpieces. This art mostly depicts man's association with nature. Practiced across the Mithila region — mostly by women — the art form can also be found in Darbhanga and the Ranti village.

TIKULI

Unique to the state of Bihar, Tikuli art is

usually bright, colourful and dotted. Dating back almost 800 years, it originated in Patna and included the Mughals as its patrons. From being manufactured and designed in the local streets, the art form has flourished into a major source of attraction for travellers.

These art forms depict India's culture, history, traditions, and folklore. While artists, enthusiasts and patrons dive into Bihar's art scene, in today's time travellers are also making their way to understand and cherish India's — especially Bihar's — long standing affair with history, traditions and culture.

There's another thing that pulls the travellers to Bihar — exploring some of the most fascinating and largely unexplored places.

With its lands echoing mythological tales and serving as the nursery of pilgrimage, Bihar is a traveller's dream. The unexplored destinations hide stories from its glorious past, and you will get immersed in the folklores and traditions that make this state a unique experience.

GRIDHAKUT HILL

One of the most serene places in the state, the Gridhakut Hill is also known as Vulture Peak, as it appears in the shape of a vulture head, owing to a natural stone formation. One of the most ancient sites in the state, it is here that Lord Buddha preached his Lotus Sermon. A statue of Lord Buddha was also found here, which is currently stationed at the Archeological Museum of Nalanda.

KAIMUR HILLS

An air of mystery surrounds the Kaimur Hills



Telhar Kund



Photo Credit: Anup Singh

as various antiquities are still dispersed in the deep jungles here. Significant from social, ecological and historical points of view, they are characterised by deep gorges, waterfalls and dense jungles. These hills are also one of the oldest rock formations in India, and are a visual treat during the monsoons.

KASHISH WATERFALL

The Kashish Waterfall is one of the 200 waterfalls that are said to appear in Bihar during the monsoons. Almost 800 feet high, this waterfall is a visual treat. If the locals are to be believed one can witness four waterfalls falling in three different directions from the mountain.

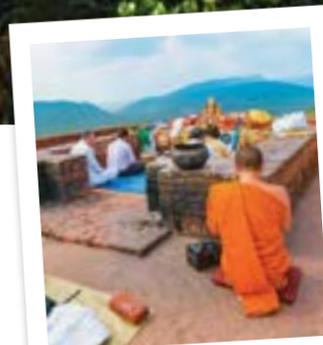
TUTLA BHAWANI WATERFALL

Two mountain ranges converge at a green valley and in the middle of their convergence springs the Tutla Bhawani waterfall. Covered by mountain ranges all across, this waterfall makes for a spellbinding visual treat. It is also from this waterfall that the Kachuar river originates.

Bihar is a state of many talents, folklores, and natural wonders. Be it your keenness for culture and art, the intent to immerse yourself in spiritual learnings, or to satisfy your spirit of adventure by visiting some unexplored places, Bihar will leave you spellbound.

ECHOING THE CHANTS INTO THE VALLEYS

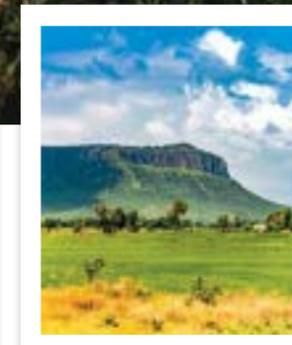
These steps lead to tranquility and teachings of Lord Buddha
The stupa atop the Gurpa Hill is the abode of Mahakasyapa



Gridhakut Hill



Telhar Kund



Kaimur hill



Karkatgarh Waterfall



The state of Bihar is a geographical confluence of centuries-old culture, spirituality, and adventure. With mythological and spiritual reflections, vibrant cities, teeming wilderness, world-famous arts, and sumptuous food, Bihar is a land of varied experiences.

Lose yourself in the meditative chants, stand in awe of ancient marvels, and treat your palate!

Come, explore Bihar to explore yourself.

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www.tourism.bihar.gov.in

VISIT
BIHAR

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KERALA

↳ Migratory birds visit the marshes surrounding the Vembanad Lake

SAVING INDIA'S LARGEST Lake

A fisherman-conservationist, who is part of a community setting up fish sanctuaries in Vembanad Lake says that the belief that a rising tide will lift all boats, will help save India's largest lake

I WAS BORN IN A TRADITIONAL FISHING

community along the Vembanad Lake, a wetland system that connects 1.6 million lives across three districts of Kerala. My earliest childhood memories are those of sitting by the lakeside near my home and dropping the net in it to catch different varieties of fish. It was the time when the lake was home to over 150 species of fish.

Even as a child, I was aware of the challenges that the fishermen in my community faced to make ends meet. Over the years, as the fish population in the lake declined, the problems of the fishermen inflated multifold. There are many factors



↗ Anchovies from the lake

Half of the 150 species of crabs have been wiped out since the barrage was built and it has resulted in community and government losses amounting to hundreds of crores

that contributed to the impoverishment of the Vembanad Lake ecosystem.

One of the major factors was the construction of Thanneermukkom salt water barrier in 1975 across the Vembanad Lake. It prevented the flow of salt water from the tidal waves of the Arabian Sea into the lowlands of the Kuttanad region. This was done to help paddy cultivation that needs fresh water. This barrier divided the 36,000 hectares lake into two parts, the north and the south.

Before the barrier was commissioned, 429 tonnes of prawns were obtained from the lake as per the government records. A year after its completion, the number declined by 27 tonnes. Studies revealed that this decline was a result of reduced salinity in water in the southern part of the lake. Prawns need salty water for breeding; clams, too. A clam lays about 5 lakhs eggs, which the salty water facilitates the hatching of. The population of crabs and shrimp that used to come from the sea into the lake water also declined. Half of the 150 species of crabs have been wiped out since the barrage was built and it has resulted in community and government losses amounting to hundreds of crores.



↖ A fresh catch of clams

The GREEN REVOLUTION

that commenced in 1965 in India was another factor that adversely impacted the marine life of Vembanad Lake. Excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers to protect grain crops and increase crop production polluted the water of the lake and resulted in the disappearance of fish species. Moreover, the consumption of fish from the pesticide-laden water caused health hazards.

The growth of the industrial sector caused industrial waste to trickle into the lake. Also, increased tourism brought more boats than the lake could carry. All these factors contributed heavily to polluting the lake water, shrinking its size, decimating fish stock and eventually impacting the livelihoods of the local fishermen.

With survival becoming difficult, the fishermen replaced the old eco-friendly nets with nylon nets with the smallest mesh size to catch more fish, including juvenile ones. Earlier, they caught large clams, but due to the lack of availability, small clams were



The Craft of Emotion

Born out of a candid conversation about two people's passion, Ikai Asai has been the bridging structure for the creative artisans in the rural India to showcase their gift of crafts making at the world stage

Job interviews can sometimes be very interesting and life altering. Had it been the typical interview format, Kanupriya may have been sitting in a very structured corporate setting, gazing endlessly at revenue projections and presentations with colourful animations. But it wasn't, so she isn't.

Kanupriya Verma — a young and dynamic CEO of what is not only an organisation, but a community movement — did not plan this journey. Her interview with Ananya Birla caught the wind of passion and drifted towards a heartfelt conversation that eventually birthed Ikai Asai.

In addition to being a platform to magnify the grace and subtlety of Indian artisanal work on a larger canvas for the world to appreciate, Ikai Asai is also a



Practiced hands display their skill in crafting the perfect pot

movement to exalt the way of life of the people who are behind the creations. Ikai Asai works with the craftspeople for not only sourcing products, but also gives them useful knowledge of market trends through workshops.

The functions that afford the organisation its uniqueness are material

library and R&D. There's constant investment of thought and capital in bringing up the quality, and the commitment is aptly showcased in Ikai Asai's growth intentions. The catalogue was introduced in Paris in 2020, and Ikai Asai has made ravishing impressions in the whole of European, and American markets. China is also expected to become a profitable centre of business in the coming years.

Ikai Asai products are categorised on the emotion they reflect. The mellow chants of meditative energies are expressed through the power of simplicity in the portfolio of 'Deva', while 'Kama' is the demonstration of desire and indulgence. The innocence, glee and adventure of nomadic spirit is showcased in the collection called 'Lila', and 'Junoon' is all about bold and fearless display of character.

With the binding layers of emotion and passion, and the intrinsic character of the artisans reflecting in each of the products, Ikai Asai proudly blends the depth of Indianness to the international tonality of each creation.



☞ Fish sanctuaries are built using bamboo and branches of cashew and mango trees

SHUTTERSTOCK

targeted as well. If you catch a clam when it is 6 months old, it does not have reproductive capacity. So, reproduction of clams stopped and clam catches fell. Not a single spot of the lake was left untouched.

To address these ever-increasing problems, the Vembanad Nature Club was established in 1986 in Muhamma village. In 2007, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE) started working together with the local fishing communities and institutions to address the conservation issues the lake faced.

I joined Vembanad Kayal Samrakshana Samiti, or the Lake Protection Forum (LPF), at a young age. LPFs use traditional ecological knowledge to govern and manage

fishery resources. They study the challenges of the fishing community, come up with localised solutions, find people who are interested in supporting the initiatives, and work with them to bring about real change.

I started participating in LPF initiatives and organised many awareness programs for fishermen, general public and government officials. To prevent the problems associated with overfishing, we started building fish sanctuaries by using bamboo fencing and branches of cashew and mango trees. These sanctuaries were declared no-fishing zones to help fish breed and LPF members took turns to keep vigil.

Today, through the continuous and combined efforts of organisations such as

ATREE and Cherish Expeditions, local bodies such as Lake Protection Forum, and also some foreign student groups, we have been able to raise funds and establish 30 fish sanctuaries. The evaluation of these sanctuaries by fishery experts has shown an increase in the fish stock. We have also managed to get the government to establish 14 fish sanctuaries over an area of two hectares. Additionally, five Panchayats manage five sanctuaries.

The FISHING COMMUNITIES

have realised that these sanctuaries would make it possible to improve their lives and livelihoods. Fish sanctuaries have managed to curb overfishing. They also act as artificial mangroves that protect us from floods.

The biggest achievement has been that these sanctuaries have raised awareness about sustainable fishing within a community that was once exploiting the lake without sparing a thought for the future. Changing habits can take time. But without changing our habits permanently, how can we expect a real change to happen? ☞



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

K M POOVU

was born and brought up on the banks of Vembanad Lake — the longest lake in India. He is the Secretary of the Lake Protection Forum, a body that uses traditional ecological knowledge to govern and manage fishery resources. Poovu has also authored a book that explains how to protect fish reserves against overfishing.

Supported
by - Cherish
Expeditions



info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

The Muhamma village and the fish sanctuaries built at the Vechoor Panchayat are near Thanneermukkom Bund (Thanneermukkom Salt Water Barrier), which is a part of Vembanad Lake — the largest lake in India located in the Alleppey district in the state of Kerala. Thanneermukkom Bund is the only coastal reservoir in India. The nearest airports are Cochin at 69 km (1.5 hours) and Thiruvananthapuram at 174 km (3.5 hours by road). The nearest railway station is at Alleppey. The town nearest to Thanneermukkom is Cherthala.

How to get involved

☒ Travel with Cherish Expeditions to be a part of awareness campaigns, community tourism activities, experiential educational programs and much more for immersive, sustainable and transformational experiences. For more details visit www.cherishexpeditions.com.

Things to do

☒ Kumarakom bird sanctuary and Ashtamudi Lake are the main tourist attractions near Thanneermukkom Bund.
☒ Cherish Expeditions promotes sustainable and responsible tourism in the district with activities such as interaction with coir making community, exploring the lake, educational experiences of paddy cultivation below sea level farming, heritage walks, visiting and interactive session at the first sanitary napkin free village etc.



A set of wrinkled yet determined fingers working tirelessly next to a pair of young and excited hands - this is the unadulterated traditional practice of passing knowledge and skill from one generation to the next. Madhya Pradesh has had a strong connection with its beautiful and creative past which continues to sparkle in modern times.

Be it a craftsman holding a gouge gently against the wood, tapping it tenderly with a hammer to shape it to the perfect depth; or the mindful play of fingers of an artisan to make intricate designs from praxis past on a piece of cloth - this is legacy being delivered for a beautiful future. Here, traditional practices thrive.

Chanderi has always been very desirable for travellers, but at the heart of MP reside many more long-established art forms which will leave you amazed.

PATALKOT CHIND ART

This traditional art form originated in the Patalkot, around 80kms from Pachmarhi. With the use of wood, bamboo and chind leaves, the craftsmen make ornaments, traditional headgear for weddings as well as artefacts. Passed on from generation to generation, this traditional art form involves cutting the leaves first, then peeling, chopping and ultimately preparing them for the craft.

BHEDAGHAT'S MARBLE ART

While the Dhaundhar falls might be the highlight of Bhedaghat in Jabalpur, the incredible craft of marble sculpting is what travellers take back from here. The sculptors here make use of the mighty marble rocks by the Narmada river and convert them into deities with intricacies or quirky sculptures. These sculptors can be found working full swing by the ghats or along the shopping streets.

BHERUGARH'S BATIK PRINTING

With a legacy of over 2,000 years, Batik printing was practiced in



Egypt and Japan as well. In Ujjain this art form finds its home in the small village of Bherugarh, by the banks of the Shipra river. This craft of antiquity is essentially wax-resist dyeing and printing. The fascinating part? There is not just one single way to do it, rather vivid techniques are used to make the craft more appealing.

BETUL'S DHOKRA ART

Practiced by the local tribal community in Betul, this metal moulding craft is created using the lost-wax casting technique. Dhokra art is created using beeswax, saras, mud and cow dung, and undergoes the processes of mixing, collecting, straining, drying and then baking to create the final masterpiece. The products generally include lamps, photo frames, bells, animal figurines etc.

UJJAIN'S PAPIER MACHE

Regenerating waste into pieces of art, this popular art form uses paper pulp and adhesive to create masterpieces. With the bare minimum usage of energy and resources, this art form's precision is pure craftsmanship. The whole process involves soaking, mashing, drying the paper, soaking it with glue and plaster of paris, putting it in moulds to create the desired shapes, drying them out and ultimately hand painting it with vibrant colours.



A teacher from Maharashtra's Purushwadi village visually documents the craftsmanship of two brothers and their imagination to create sustainable vessels, ornaments and more

www.voicesofruralindia.org

↑ The Shindi tree with whitish-yellow clump growth

MAHADU CHINDHU KONDAR

IMAGINATION AND Beyond

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MAHARASHTRA

I COME FROM PURUSHWADI, a small adivasi village near the Kurkundi river, where there are several types of trees, grasses and weeds, whose uses are still unknown to many.

This story is about Kahandal grass and Shindi trees that grow abundantly and the importance of which was discovered by my childhood friends – the brothers Goraksh Savreram Baramte and Tukaram Savreram Baramte. Kahandal grass grows in the

month of June and matures in November or December and turns blackish, yellowish or copper in colour.

In Purushwadi during Diwali parents buy toy guns and firecrackers for the children. Taking inspiration from the *chakra* (ground spinner) and serpent fireworks from the market, Goraksh and Tukaram made one using the Kahandal grass.

Slowly they realised that using such layers, they could make rounded hats too. Then, purely using their imagination, they learnt to make flower vases, plates and models of temples, bullock carts, birds and owls. They even began weaving *kurkula*, used for storing *bhakri* (rice flatbread). Before this, we were getting used to plastic

products from the market.

Another tree in our village is the thorny Shindi, the leaves of which village folks rarely pluck to make brooms. But Goraksh Baramte began using the leaves from these clumps and crafting them with his imagination. He plucks and brings the bunch home, and after it dries up, he makes caps, flower vases, and shapes like trees out of them.

From the craftsmanship of the brothers, I learnt that everything in nature has value. Every plant, tree and even wild grass that seems useless, can enrich our lives, create livelihoods, replace store-bought plastic and make us proud of our creativity. 🌱



↻ The dried blades of the Kahandal grass

MAHADU CHINDHU KONDAR



↻ The value of grass is incomparable

MAHADU CHINDHU KONDAR



↻ Kahandal crafts in the making

MAHADU CHINDHU KONDAR



↻ Final products shaping up

SANTOSH KONDAR

↻ Sustainable vessels created out of imagination



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

MAHADU CHINDHU KONDAR

has completed his BA/D.ED and teaches at the Sangli District Council School. He is a master trainer and senior guide-cum-facilitator in Purushwadi village. He has been working on a local climate change adaptation watershed project for the past 5 years. He also has a keen interest in reading, writing and documenting the old way of life in Purushwadi.

Supported by
- Grassroutes Journeys



GOCOOP – GLOBAL MARKETPLACE FOR HANDLOOMS AND CRAFTS OF INDIA



GoCoop is a social organization dedicated to the socio-economic development of weavers, artisans, co-operatives, micro and small entrepreneurs. It's with a belief that technology can drive social change GoCoop.com began its journey in 2012. It is India's first National award winning global marketplace platform for handloom weavers, artisans and other craft-based organisations. The marketplace brings together the producers to collectively market their products online and enable buyers and consumers across the world to discover these unique products and buy them. From pochampally ikats, Kanchi silks in south, to Bandhini, Ajrakhs from the west, crewel embroidery, tussars and woollens from the north and Sambalpuri ikats, Jamdanis and Muga silks from the east, the artisans showcase over 40 crafts on the platform.

Over the last 9 years, GoCoop has developed a strong marketplace platform completely designed for enabling and supporting multi-channel eCommerce for weavers, artisans, micro-enterprises and collectives. GoCoop platform includes web portal, multi-lingual mobile app for artisans, and a backend open-source ERP system to manage the supply chain and process the orders seamlessly.

This platform has won many national

and international recognitions as a Top Technology Innovator by DST, Govt of India, National award for eComm by Ministry of Textiles, Gol, as a Sustainable eCommerce case study by UN ESCAP.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- GoCoop is validated and recognized as TOP 50 Innovators in the India Innovation Program 2012 by Dept. of Science and Technology, Govt of India and FICCI.
- Providing online and offline Marketing services for over 350 weaver co-ops and artisans in Handloom and Handicraft Sector
- Completed 40+ projects under the Integrated Handloom Development



Scheme (IHDS), Govt. of India which includes Marketing Intelligence, Buyer Seller Meets, Forming Consortium of Weavers

- Successfully implemented an Online ERP system for APCO and TSCO, the APEX weaver organizations of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana
- GoCoop was showcased as a case study at the UN ESCAP eCommerce for Sustainable development conference at Bangkok in Nov 2017; GoCoop's founder and CEO Siva Devireddy is a member of the UN ESCAP task force on Digital economy.
- GoCoop is winner of Govt. of India's first National Award for Handlooms marketing (eCommerce) 2016!
- GoCoop was recognised as a "Champion of Change" by Niti aayog and Hon'ble Prime Minister of India in 2017

CRAFTING CHANGE TOGETHER

GoCoop has over the past 9 years created a strong supply chain of 350+ weaver and artisan co-ops and other producer organizations from 50+ important handloom clusters across India.

Over the years, we have seen a significant social change in the life of our artisans who are not only getting higher prices for their produce but are also empowered by technology which is allowing them to participate in an open marketplace without any intermediaries. Our vision is to enable and empower 1 million artisans in the next 7 years.

Join us in #CraftingChange together!



every craft has a story

explore the world of Indian craft, **handmade and handwoven** by artisans from across the country, only at GoCoop



shop on www.gocoop.com
use coupon code **LOVEFORCRAFT**
and get **10% off** on your first order!



Winner of the 1st NATIONAL AWARD for Marketing of Handlooms (e-commerce)

sarees | fabrics | apparel | home linen | accessories | menswear

☞ Lhato, the protector of our village

A

AS LITTLE KIDS, MY

siblings and I eagerly awaited the end of the long, cold winter. We live at 14000 feet in Maan village on the shores of the famous Pangong Lake, where the average temperature during winters often goes below -30 degrees celsius. And as winter sets in, the lake freezes over completely. A pristine layer of white!

But the month of April brings with it the promise of warmer days, and the biggest annual festival in our village – the Maan Deram Chenmo festival.

Under the warm spring sun the entire Pangong Lake melts at the same time with the water reflecting beautiful shades of blue. Divided by manmade boundaries and united by the Himalayas, the lake is sacred in our community.

And as the lake melts, our village wakes up from its winter slumber too.

Marking the beginning of the farming

season, the Maan Deram Chenmo festival is celebrated with great pomp and show, including archery and horse riding. Right from Merak to Spangmik, people make their way to the festival from the entire region, to witness the beauty of Pangong Lake and welcome summer together.

As a youngster, I longed to perfect my archery skills so I, too, could participate in the festival. My father taught me during my childhood and assured me that I'd have a fine aim one day. We'd retire after the lessons and as my father sat down with it, I'd pester him (and he would refuse) to let me have a taste of *chhang* – the local barley beer.

Fast forward to years later, I was old enough and managed to hit the target in archery during the festival. And my reward? The *khatak* (traditional scarf), and *chhang*!

DURING THE festival

we offer butter, barley and flowers to Lhato – the protector of our village. We believe that he shields our people from problems such as famines, border enemies,

and ensures an abundance of food for our livestock. The festival also includes exhibiting *thangkas* (traditional Buddhist paintings) on our monastery walls to remind us of Buddha's teachings.

As the weather becomes warmer, we dress up in our traditional clothes and feast on snacks and *solja* – the local tea brewed with butter and salt. At night, under the starry skies on the shores of Pangong, we bid goodbye to winter, drink *chhang* and cherish the celebration by dancing late into the night.

With changing times, I sometimes worry that the youth are losing their excitement for the festival, with only the older generation knowing the traditional festival songs. Only a few know how to ride horses and fewer still understand how Maan Deram Chenmo brings us all together.

My wish? That this nearly 600-year-old ancestral celebration shouldn't lose its sanctity with time. 🙏



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

TSEWANG DORJE

is a commerce graduate and amateur professional in conventional architectural designs. He is an ice hockey player and part of the team, 'Pangong Warriors'. He is a member of the youth association of Maan which is active on many social issues. He loves horse riding, trekking and archery. He wants to do more tangible work for the community.

Supported by -
Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE)



Ladakh's Maan village shakes off its winter slumber with the Maan Deram Chenmo festival

PHOTOGRAPHS: TSEWANG DORJE

SUMMER Embrace



☞ Archery competition during Maan Deram Chenmo

➔ The archery target at the three-day long festival



info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to Reach

- ☒ Maan is a hamlet on the shores of the Pangong Lake in Ladakh. It falls under the Changthang region of Leh District in Ladakh. There are two ways to reach Maan. Either by crossing Chang La, the world's second highest motorable pass or you can also reach via Shayok if you are coming from Nubra.
- ☒ The nearest airport is Leh which is connected well to Delhi. Alternatively, you can also drive down to Leh by a car or bike via either Manali or Srinagar.

What to do

The village is located between the beautiful Pangong Lake and snow-capped mountains in the background. It is also the world's first community run astro village. You can participate in the following activities:

- ☒ Celebrate in the annual village festival
- ☒ Witness Losar celebrations in the village
- ☒ Take a stroll along the banks of Pangong lake
- ☒ Farming with villagers
- ☒ Hike to a hidden lake
- ☒ Yoga at Pangong
- ☒ Archery
- ☒ Buy authentic yak wool carpet
- ☒ Astronomy Sessions

How to get involved

- ☒ GHE is engaged in multiple community development initiatives in the remote areas of Ladakh. You can join them on an Impact Expedition where they take travellers on a journey of adventure while leveraging the multiple facets of sustainable tourism.
- ☒ GHE has also set up homestays at Maan village that are carbon neutral to enable an eco-friendly
- ☒ stay Support the homestays initiative by booking your travel at www.mountainhomestays.com.



The Himachali children celebrate Haran, featuring a deer, music and long walks in the dark, during the renowned Kullu Dussehra

Haran is an important festival for the locals

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

H

“HUALI HUALI WAAGE NIKHAL GHAR
MAALIKA KHOLE AAYEE HORINI,
HORINI AE GAE”

“Come out of your homes! There’s a deer dancing at your door!”

The Kullu region in Himachal Pradesh comes alive with these words and the beats of drums – *dhol* and *nagada* to be precise. Children roam about the mountain villages, loudly singing songs like this to celebrate their favorite event – *Haran*. A part of the famous week-long Kullu Dussehra that symbolises victory of good over evil, *Haran* is primarily celebrated by Himachali kids. The pure joy of it, however, manages to draw participation from the elders too.

I was aged 9 when I first attended *Haran*. My overprotective mother was against the idea of me participating in it and convincing her was tough. She relented only when a few friends from the village decided to join me. I never missed any opportunity to attend the celebration thereafter.

According to popular folklore, *Haran* has its origin in the Hindu epic, Ramayana. It is believed that prior to his exile to the forest, Lord Ram wore the deer costume to take Sita, his wife, to the forest in a disguise.

Deer AT THE Door



Before taking the *Haran* costume out into the village, the kids decorate it. They make antlers from maize stems, decorate the costume with flowers, adorn it with Kulluvi pattu, handloom shawls, and wrap it with a white stole. They also make marigold garlands, and place them around the neck of the *Haran*.

Two kids – one standing and the other stooping – alternate turns. They wear the *Haran* costume and dance in tandem to the rhythm of various local percussion instruments. As the *Haran* progresses to every household in the village, more kids join the celebration, and sing and dance in unison.

Although the *Haran* is taken out only during the night, it never deters the participants – aged mostly between nine and 16 – from happily agreeing to walk in the dark. My fear of darkness was always overcome when the older kids strategically placed me in the middle of the group. With a vacation for all seven days of the



Two kids – one standing and the other stooping – wear the *Haran* costume and dance in tandem to the rhythm of various local percussion instruments as more kids join the celebrations

Kullu Dussehra, the kids' enthusiasm to participate in the festival runs high.

EACH DAY,
two

villages, spread almost across an area of five kilometres, are chosen for the procession, which begins at around six in the evening and lasts till ten at night. While kids are the highlight of the procession, elderly folks accompany them to ensure safety. As the deer makes a stop in front of every household, the residents give grains such as maize and wheat along with coins to the kids. Some people also throw walnuts which the kids are happy to catch.

When the weather gets cold, the participants generally halt for a break, start a fire and turn it into a celebration by dancing around it. To avoid walking long distances on an empty stomach, the participants are generally found with rotis



Kids carry apples and rotis to beat hunger pangs



USMAN YOUSAF



Children eagerly await to witness the procession

or apples with them. It was the same with me and whenever hunger pangs hit, we'd take out the food and eat together.

On the seventh day of Kullu Dussehra, the *Haran* enters the native village where the kids dance and enact plays. The grains collected from people's homes during the first six days are then sold and the proceeds are donated to organise a community feast where everyone from the village is invited – especially the participants of *Haran*.

After the community feast, people return to their homes, only to wait eagerly for next year's Kullu Dussehra.

Each year everyone in the village looks forward to *Haran*. It feels as though an immensely entertaining play is being enacted for you. I hope this tradition that has survived many generations in my village will be passed down and will brighten up our lives every year with drum beats and the dancing deer. 🦌



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

KANIKA MEHTA

hails from the Bihar village in the Banjar Tehsil of Kullu district in Himachal Pradesh. She is pursuing Arts in college and loves to read stories about culture. A nature lover, she enjoys trekking, and loves to teach children. She aspires to be a school teacher.

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info DESK

www.voicesofruralindia.org

How to get there

☒ Kullu lies in the picturesque state of Himachal Pradesh. It can be accessed both by road and rail easily.

How to get involved

☒ Himalayan Ecotourism has an office in the village of Bihar and all the facilities for volunteers, interns or researchers to stay. You can help in one or several projects run by Himalayan Ecotourism including teaching local children, reforestation and women empowerment. You can find more information about volunteering, internship and research opportunities at himalayanecotourism.com.

Things to do

☒ Travellers can immerse themselves in local culture and traditions. At a walking distance from the village of Bihar, stands the incredible Chehni Kothi, the tallest building of Himachal, made in a traditional style with no concrete but wood and stones. One can undertake various treks in the valley.

✦ The snow-clad Panchchuli peaks in Uttarakhand

78
UTTARAKHAND

HONOURING THE *Flying* SAVIOURS

For the festival of Ghughuti, locals prepare edible garlands and celebrate crows in villages across Kumaon in Uttarakhand



↳ The crows awaiting their feast

SHUTTERSTOCK

K

“KALE KAUVE, KALE KAUVE, GHUGHUTI MALA KHAALE!”

This gusty call to summon crows echoes across Kumaon on the first day of the month of Maagh* (around January 15) each year. Children wake up early, bathe and get ready for the Ghughuti festival.

I, too, wake up at 4 am – well before the sun rises from behind the Panchachuli mountains. In the bitter cold, and after washing the mud plastered floor of the kitchen and courtyard, I bathe and light the lamp in my temple room. By one o’ clock, my ghughuti are ready – made by kneading



REKHA RAUTELA

↳ The deeply fried Ghughutis

wheat flour with jaggery and ghee in milk, then deep frying in oil.

Each year, as I make garlands of ghughuti and give them to the children of my village, I fondly remember my mother’s home. As a child, I’d visit my neighbours to collect

ghughuti garlands and when the family gathered at home, mother narrated the tale of how the Ghughuti festival began.

Many moons ago, Kumaon was ruled by King Kalyan of the Chandra dynasty. He was childless and worried about who would be his heir to the throne. One night, Lord Bagnaath appeared in his dreams in the form of Lord Shiva and said to the King, “If you build a temple in my name, a child will be born to you.”

The king and the queen were elated, and built a temple which is situated in Bageshwar and can be visited to this day. They bore a boy and lovingly named him Ghughuti. A garland of bells (similar to a *ghungroo*) was placed around the child’s neck and that too was called Ghughuti. Whenever Ghughuti, the boy, behaved naughtily, the queen would teasingly say



↳ A child from Sarmoli wearing a Ghughuti garland

REKHA RAUTELA

that she’d give his garland to the crows. The trick worked!

There was a minister in the king’s court who wanted to become the next king, and to fulfill his ambition, he hatched a plan to kill Ghughuti.

One day he lured the child and took off to the jungle with him. A few crows saw the minister sneaking out of the palace with the child. The crows followed them deep into the forest. At one opportune moment,

a crow swooped and snatched the garland off Ghughutis’s neck and flew away with it to the king’s palace.

Meanwhile, in the palace, the king and queen were extremely worried at Ghughuti’s disappearance. The king suspected that the minister – who was ambitious and seemed jealous of Ghughuti – must have planned an evil act. He sent all his ministers and royal guards in search of Ghughuti.

When the ministers caught sight of the crow with the garland of bells in its beak, they informed the king and queen, who were sure the crow bore good news. It guided them to where Ghughuti was hidden. The kingdom was overjoyed on having found the child. The king and queen bowed to the crow repeatedly, and punished the minister who had plotted to kill Ghughuti.

In celebration of Ghughuti’s return, the royal couple threw a lavish banquet. This was the last day of the month of *Paush* and the crows were to be fed first. But as evening descended, the crows could not attend the feast. They were especially invited for the feast the next day – the first day of the month of *Maagh*.

To this day, we show our appreciation to the black crows through the Ghughuti festival. The first dishes of the day are cooked in their honor, and fed to them when they answer the summoning calls across Kumaon. Children then roam the village with their edible Ghughuti garlands draped around their necks, nibbling away at it all day.

**Maagh is the eleventh month of the Hindu calendar, which corresponds with January / February of the Gregorian calendar.*

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How to get there

- ✕ By air: The nearest airport is Pant Nagar. Flights in summers are highly frequent
- ✕ By rail: The nearest railway station to the Kumaon region is Kathgodam, situated a little over 30kms away. All major cities are well connected to the region via rail
- ✕ By road: The region is well connected via road to all cities. However, it is advised to take an experienced driver owing to the undulating terrain

How to get involved

- ✕ Himalayan Ark is a mountain community owned-and-run tourism enterprise based in Munsiri, Uttarakhand. They enable and guide deep dives into rural lives and cultures, as well as in natural history and high mountain conservation initiatives and adventures. You can support them by staying at one of the many homestays they run in Munsiri, Uttarakhand.

Things to do

- ✕ The region is filled with tiny hamlets and meadows for travellers to cherish. One can undertake treks, lodge in homestays, visit organic farms, engage with the local population and learn sustainable ways of living. The region is heaven for bird watchers.



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

KAMLA PANDEY

has been running a charming homestay in Sarmoli village. She doesn’t consider herself a storyteller. Perhaps that’s why she feels surprised at the number of stories she now tells that reveal the secrets and knowledge of village life in the mountains.

Supported by – Himalayan Ark



CELEBRATING Magh

A delightful account of how the mountain villages of Himachal Pradesh celebrate a month of food and togetherness during the Magh Mahina

I

GREW UP LISTENING TO WISTFUL STORIES OF MY GRANDPARENTS.

Every winter, as white snow enveloped the mountains of Bihar – our little village in the Tirthan Valley of Himachal Pradesh – all village families came together to cook local delicacies during the ‘*Magh Mahina*’.

We celebrate local festivals almost every single month of the year. But *Magh Mahina* – each year from January 15 to February 15 – is a special month dedicated to local delicacies. In the cold mountain winter, it brings together the warmth of families, friends and food. It was introduced by our ancestors a long time ago and is still the most awaited month of the year.

As kids, my grandfather and his friends would go from one home to another, asking fellow villagers for walnuts to

munch on. Every family would gather together in the evening to light a fire and roast the walnuts over it, warming up on chilly winter days, sharing stories, laughing and bonding.

Back in the day, families of the village always struggled with their finances. Cooking several dishes was not always practical. But despite the challenges, they would still come together to cook, even if it meant choosing only one dish. It was a time of celebration after all.

These days, women cook a variety of local dishes, including *bhalla* (fried lentil

Women place a walnut each in the four corners of their cowshed. Young children try to make the most of this opportunity by waking up early in the morning to steal the walnuts

doughnuts), *babru* (sweet fritters), and *lucchi* and *puri* (sweet or salted fried breads) among others. Of these, *bhalla* holds a special place in our hearts because the recipe has been passed down by women of each family for generations.

For me, learning how to cook the perfect *bhalla* was quite a ride. This flavourful dish is made by soaking *maash ki dal* (white urad) or black gram overnight. It is then bonded together with flour, rolled into tiny *rotis* and fried in either oil or ghee. The perfect *bhalla* is round, soft yet crispy, and slowly melts in your mouth with an explosion of spicy flavours.

The very first serving of any dish prepared during *Magh Mahina* is pledged to *Kul Devta*, the local deity. This is done by either throwing some food in the fire, or in between the slates of the roof. We believe that *Kul Devta* takes care of our family, home and village.

The three days following the end of *Magh Mahina* – known as *Saaje* – mark the beginning of a new month, so we pledge

our respect to the deities. During this time, women place a walnut each in the four corners of their cowshed as a token of respect. Young children try to make the most of this opportunity by waking up early in the morning to steal the walnuts.

As a kid, I would wake up well before sunrise – and before any other member of my family – just so I could run to the cowshed and steal the walnuts. Back in those days, there was no electricity so I would startle my mother every time she came to the cowshed. These days, the availability of light bulbs has taken away some of the thrill of hiding in the darkness – but kids still have their share of fun.



↳ The spicy and crispy bhallas



↳ Walnuts are a kid's delight

When I reflect on my grandfather's stories, I realise that the times have changed. We can afford to cook many more delicious dishes now, have access to electricity, and besides walnuts, we can also buy *rabadi* (sesame sweets) and *moongfali* (peanuts) in the market. But there is one thing that hasn't changed – the way *Magh Mahina* brings us together and fills the cold mountain winter with the warmth of food and togetherness. 🍷



ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

SONIYA THAKUR

is a 21-year-old student of geography from Bihar village in Himachal Pradesh. She loves to play volleyball, dance and sing. She is a trained beautician and dreams of becoming a professional make-up artist someday.

Supported by – *Himalayan Ecotourism*



↳ Drying corn on the rooftop

CIAT (CC)

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How to reach

☒ Bihar is a small village located in the Kullu District of Himachal Pradesh. It is flanked by the Jibhi valley on one side and the Tirthan valley on the other. Both Jibhi and Banjar are approximately at a distance of 8km from Bihar. The village can be accessed via road only and is about 500kms from Delhi and close to 250km from Chandigarh.

What to do

☒ The village of Bihar has beautiful houses made in the traditional Himachali style. At a walking distance from the village stands the incredible Chehni Kothi, the tallest building of Himachal, made in a traditional style with no concrete but wood and stones. One can also undertake hikes from the village in the nearby forests.

How to get involved

☒ Himalayan Ecotourism has an office in the village of Bihar and all the facilities for volunteers, interns or researchers to stay. You can help in one or several projects run by Himalayan Ecotourism including teaching local children, reforestation and women empowerment. You can find more information about volunteering, internship and research opportunities at himalayanecotourism.com.



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Shivya Nath



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Shivya Nath is the author of a bestselling travel memoir and runs one of India's most widely read travel blogs, The Shooting Star. She is one of the co-founders of VoRI, and heads editing and social media.

Malika Virdi is the founder-director of Himalayan Ark, a community-based tourism organization in the Munsiyari region of Uttarakhand. She is one of the co-founders of VoRI, and heads partnerships.

Osama Manzar is a global leader on the mission of eradicating information poverty from India and global south using digital tools through Digital Empowerment Foundation, an organisation he founded in 2002. He is one of the co-founders of VoRI, and heads fundraising.

Namrata Shah is a travel lover, amateur singer, books lover, yoga learner and movie buff. She oversees editing and wordpress at VoRI.

Janusa Sangma presently writes freelance for social enterprises, non-profits and digital marketing agencies. She manages social media at VoRI.

Our Volunteers

A team of passionate, dedicated volunteers help us with translation, text editing, video editing, social media, brainstorming ideas and developing training material.



Lakshmi Jagad is a writer, editor and blogger based in Atlanta, USA and has a Master's degree in Mass Communication from Georgia State University. She is a master translator at VoRI.

Farha Mukri is a software engineer and freelance writer from Mumbai, currently based in Chicago. She volunteers as a translator at VoRI.



Soity Banerjee has been a travel and food journalist for over 17 years, engaging with questions of identity, evolution and sustainability. She volunteers as an editor at VoRI.

Richa Somvanshi was an HR Profession and is now working with various NGOs in their program implementation. Richa supports translation at VoRI.



Ellie Cleary is the founder of Soul Travel Blog and co-founder of Soul Travel India. Originally from London, UK, she has worked in tourism since 2007. Ellie supports SEO at VoRI.

Charu Babbar earns her livelihood by helping organizations simplify their marketing. She supports SEO at VoRI.



Neha Dara is the business head at RoundGlass Sustain. She has been a travel writer and editor for most of her career and has a keen interest in sustainability and responsible tourism. She volunteers as an editor at VoRI.

Pallavi Garg leads Product Management at PATH, a global nonprofit organisation. She volunteers at many art-based organisations and supports translation at VoRI.



Shilpa Raina is interested in understanding the continuity of cultural heritage among refugees. Her words have appeared in The Indian Express, The Hindu and TAKE on Art magazine. She volunteers as an editor at VoRI.

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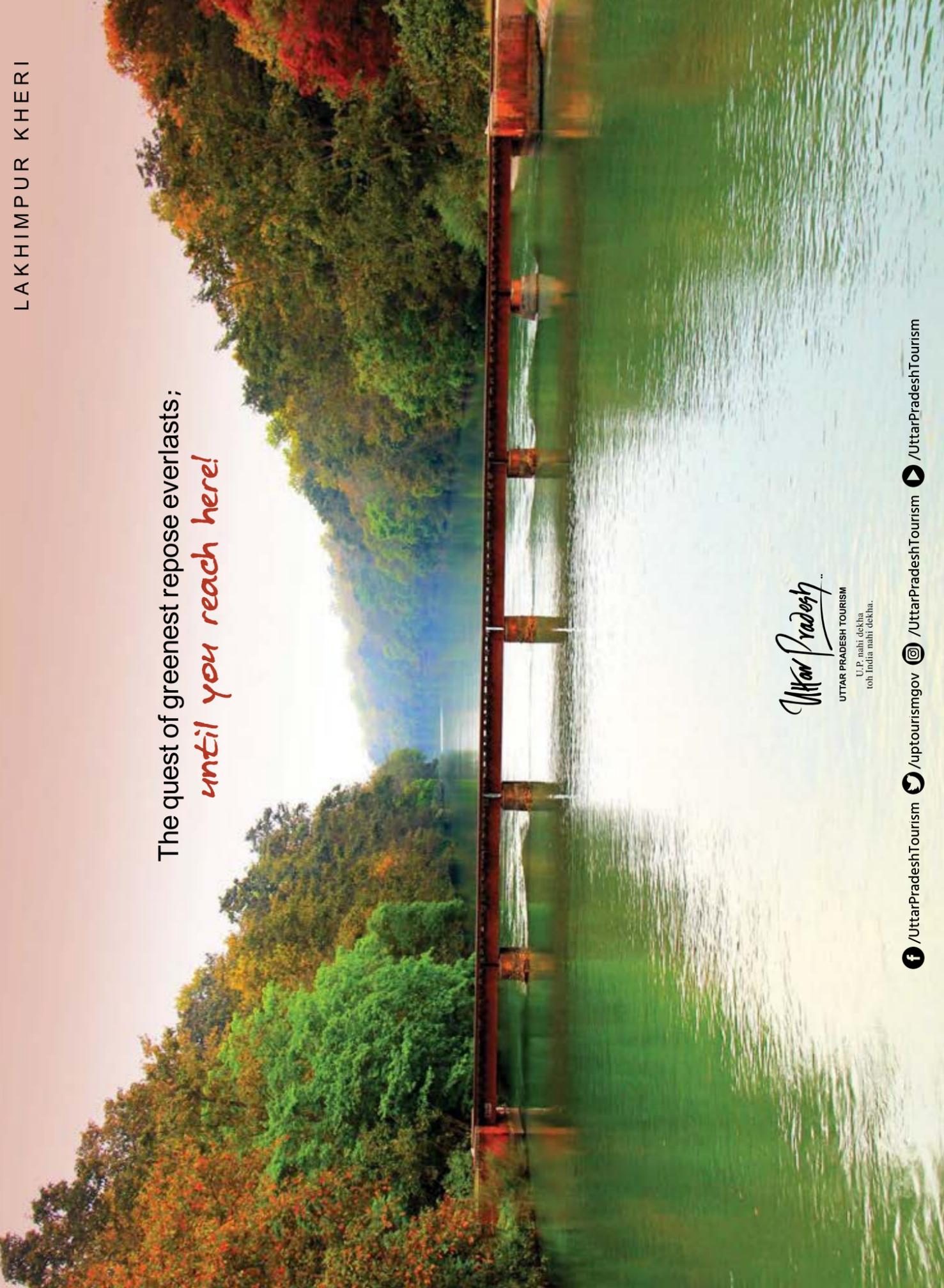
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You can't lose your way when there are no wrong turns. That was the feeling I got in Saputara. Here, every turn offered me new things. Like the meandering Ambika river. Each step brought me closer to nature. In the dense jungles of Dangs, I felt as if all the trees and shrubs were my old friends.

The local tribesmen, their art, culture and traditions made me experience a harmony we city dwellers miss. Saputara gave me the solitude I always craved for, with just clouds and fine weather for company. How can one even think about leaving a place like this?



Pantashil Sachan