

Evaluation of the project

**Fernweh Fair Travel
-Uplifting Communities**

in India



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for

Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.

February 2024

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Location of the Fernweh Fair Travel project in the Indian region Gopeshwar-Chamoli



1 INTRODUCTION

The application for the TO DO Award 2024 was submitted by the NGO Fernweh Fair Travel – Uplifting Communities from Gopeshwar-Chamoli, Uttarakhand in India and nominated by the TO DO Award Jury. The evaluator, Dr. Dietmar Quist, was on a mission in Uttarakhand, India, from December 3 to December 11, 2023, on behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development, to verify the documents submitted by Fernweh Fair Travel (FFT) on-site.

Based on the insights and findings gained, the author recommends awarding the NGO **Fernweh Fair Travel – Uplifting Communities** with the TO DO Award 2024.

2 BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

For the seventh time, the TO DO Award goes to India!

India, more a continent than a country, impresses and confounds with its stark contrasts:

India (3.287 million km²) is nearly 30% smaller in area than the EU states (4.2 million km²). With over 1.4 billion people since 2023, India is the most populous country on Earth; the EU has less than 450 million people. In India, an average of 470 people live per square kilometer, in Germany 233, and in China 150.

Over 25% of all Indians are under 15 years of age. Every year, about 5 million new highly qualified, as well as unskilled, workers enter the Indian job market. By 2030, a surplus of 245 million skilled workers is projected. The annual economic growth rate (2022) is at 7.2% (China 5.3; USA 1.4; Germany 0.1). By 2030, India will have overtaken Germany as the current third strongest economic power in the world. Alone, 32 million Indians live abroad and remit annually 100 billion US dollars to their homeland. Every year, an additional 2.5 million migrate.

India's development is a major success story: in the last 20 years, labor productivity has doubled; access to clean water increased from only 34% to over 80%; whereas previously 7% of Indians owned a car, now it's 26%; internet usage rose from 3% to 47%. Despite its rapid growth, India emits "only" 2.8 tons of greenhouse gases per capita per year (USA 17.9; EU 8.09). Annually, 43,200 patents are filed (in 2005, it was 8,000).

India is considered the fourth strongest military power in the world (after the USA, Russia, China).

In August 2023, India succeeded as the fourth country in achieving a soft landing on the Moon, using a self-developed rocket and lunar vehicle. By 2040, Indian astronauts are planned to set foot on the Moon. Missions for the exploration of the Sun, Mars, and Venus are already happening or planned for the near future. Prime Minister Modi expresses India's new self-confidence: India's space success belongs to all of humanity.

India is the country with the third-highest number of billionaires.

Germany is the seventh largest investor in India. It is THE future market: stable political conditions, very favorable wages, many skilled workers. And Germany is India's most important trading partner in Europe.

Another side of India:

Despite all modernity and billionaires, India still receives development aid, particularly from Germany and the United Kingdom. German support amounts to about 10 billion euros until 2030, primarily in the form of low-interest loans to combat climate change and poverty.

Youth unemployment is at 23%. Just one example: 10 million people applied for 35,000 positions at the Indian State Railways. The level of education in services is high, but very low in the manufacturing sector.

Approximately only 23% of women are employed in India (compared to 47% in Germany; only Afghanistan and Pakistan have lower rates in Asia). Over 150 million Indians still lack access to toilets

and clean water. The disparity between the rich and the poor is extremely wide, with luxury, poverty, and hunger coexisting in close quarters. There is a high rate of internal migration from the north to the south, with the less educated primarily migrating from the north.

Despite its size and large population, India ranks 15th in international tourism, but when considering its population size, it falls to 137th place, with about 250,000 German tourists and business people visiting. The share of tourism in the economy has decreased from nearly 1% in 2010 to 0.3% in 2024, due to rapid growth in other economic sectors. Most of the tourism from the US and Europe is concentrated in the Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur area, known as the "Golden Triangle".

"Understanding India (2020)", a sympathy magazine by the Study Circle for Tourism and Development, offers a variety of other facets of India.

Uttarakhand (58,000 km², roughly the size of Lower Saxony) is the state where Fernweh Fair Travel (FFT) is based. It is one of the poorer but rapidly developing states, though this applies mainly to the fertile, densely populated plains. The mountainous Himalayan regions, where FFT offers tours, are sparsely populated with about 49 inhabitants per km², and the income and employment opportunities are very limited. The illiteracy rate in the mountain regions is over 35% (India 27%), and the education level is low. Over 90% of the people rely on agriculture, growing millet, potatoes, vegetables, and apples. Many small farms and hamlets characterize the landscape in the valleys. Farming is mostly for self-sufficiency. Many residents are poor and have little involvement in the monetary economy. Children often attend school primarily because they receive state-guaranteed meals and school uniforms. Despite self-sufficiency in farming, hungry people are still rare. Transportation connections are poor - in the mountains, asphalt roads are almost always single-lane.

Uttarakhand is the source of the Ganges River, sacred to Hindus. Rishikesh on the Ganges is home to hundreds of yoga schools, temples, and gurus. The Beatles found their spiritual awakening there. In the valleys and even on mountain peaks, there are countless sacred sites and temples: Uttarakhand is known as the "Land of the Gods", hosting the sacred residences of deities. Centuries-old temples in the "Land of the Gods" exist not just for devout Hindus, but also for Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists.

65% of Uttarakhand is forested, providing habitat for leopards, snow leopards, tigers, bears, etc. Twelve national parks cover 13.8% of the land area. The Corbett National Park, India's oldest, is home to Bengal tigers. Nanda Devi is the highest mountain (7,816m) entirely in India.

Local tourism, in its most modest form, has existed in the region for over 1500 years. Pilgrims have been and continue to come to the holy sites and religious festivals. Western foreigners (except in Rishikesh) are rare; tourist activities nearly cease in the winter months. Hotels are scarce, and homestays often offer only basic quality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism largely came to a halt.

3 The Fernweh Fair Travel Project and Its Significance

3.1 Origin and Objectives

The founder of Fernweh Fair Travel - Uplifting Communities, Ms. Poonam Rawat-Hahne, hails from Gopeshwar-Chamoli in Uttarakhand. Her family is well-known in the region; her father was a respected high-ranking officer in the Indian Army. She was fortunate to spend at least two months each year in her homeland, learning the local language and becoming familiar with the region's nuances. At the same time, she often found herself in different worlds, learning to view her home with the critical eye of an outsider.

In her family, it was a tradition to provide food and clothing to the poor, needy, beggars, and the hungry. Starting in 2007, support for women, particularly in a "Women Shelter," was expanded to include

overnight stays and residence, with simple training programs offered.

In 2010, an encounter with a young, 22-year-old pregnant widow with two small children became a pivotal experience for Poonam. She offered the young woman training and residence in the Women Shelter, but she declined. She had to care for her small children, grow enough food to feed her family, and take care of her in-laws. Despite her poverty, she had no free time; she had to work hard. Tradition dictates that widows cannot remarry, often leading to a life of dependency akin to slavery. Poonam, who already followed the motto, "Don't give a fish, teach to fish," was shocked and unsettled. She began to take an interest in the fates of widows in her region. She quickly learned that there were many, even very young, widows. Work accidents were common, and widespread alcohol consumption among men often led to fatal falls in the mountains. The widows were without rights, frequently pressured, and had no chance to change their lives. Her research also brought to light domestic violence and the fate of other underprivileged individuals, mostly women.

Poonam resolved not to accept this intolerable situation any longer. She needed to educate these people and find paid work for them, particularly to create opportunities for women to lead self-determined lives. She wanted to "teach to fish." But first, she had to "find the fish." There were few job opportunities, especially for women. Starting in 2011, she actively sought new job opportunities.

Tourism seemed to be the only viable option for creating jobs. In 2012, in consultation with those in need, a plan was devised to develop Community-Based Tourism.

In conservative, traditionally shaped regions, the consent of men, elders, politicians, representatives, and religious leaders is essential for introducing innovations. Poonam was aware of this from the start. And for her, as a woman, it was particularly challenging to be respected. Her origins and local language skills, however, facilitated her endeavor. From 2012 to 2015, she trained in tourism management; above all, she discussed and debated her vision – new jobs through tourism – with most regional representatives. This phase lasted about five years. Today, she simply says: "It was difficult." But she was successful.

In 2016, Fernweh Fair Travel - Uplifting Communities was founded, also to provide advertising, startup, and booking opportunities for the region. The first homestays, with only a few rooms, were completed, and the first guests arrived!

It was essential to find a way for women to continue managing childcare, animal care, and other domestic duties. Women could often work only irregularly and usually only a few hours, and not every day. The new tasks (cooking, gardening, cleaning) had to be distributed among many women. Nevertheless, it worked.

Of course, more is needed for simple tourism to function:

Meals had to be tasty and hygienically prepared. Kitchens and rooms had to meet hygienic standards and also be cozy. Foreigners, especially from Western countries, have specific expectations and desires, and this had to be explained. This starts with cozy bed linen, pictures, or art objects on the walls, a pleasant breakfast atmosphere, explanations about the food served, etc. Drivers and guides also learned to understand the concerns of guests. To bridge the gap from understanding to action, training programs are continuously offered, in which women and, to a lesser extent, men participate.

Poonam is a devoted proponent of permaculture, where plants are grown together to complement and protect each other from diseases and pests. She focuses on growing lettuce, spice plants, and herbs in home gardens to enrich and diversify the cuisine. These measures also benefit the families and children. From the beginning, part of the revenue was allocated to projects in communities and schools.

Poonam continued her education: The concepts of sustainable, responsible, regenerative, participative tourism, which benefits local people, matched her vision. Her own homestay (large enough to accommodate groups) was recognized in 2019, and Poonam received the "Women's Leader In Adventure" award and a scholarship from ATTA (Adventure Travel Trade Association). The travel program was extended to five small locations, with about 200 women actively involved in tourism

projects. 2020 would have been the best year for FFT in terms of registrations, but the outbreak of Covid nearly brought tourism to a halt.

It took over five years of hard persuasion to turn an idea into a successful tourism project. The journey is not over. New women, new homestays, new situations, like during Covid, require continuous training and refresher courses. Although the Covid pandemic nearly halted tourism, the time was used for further expansion, training, and many discussions.

The idea and principle of using tourism as a gain for existence without neglecting traditional activities and without becoming dependent have proven and confirmed themselves.

The pandemic did not stop the activities of the self-help groups. By 2023, the number of participating villages and hamlets had increased by nine. The number of homestays rose to twelve. Women and men began to improve their craft skills and produce souvenirs for tourists by (re)making their traditional items.

557 people are now directly involved in tourism activities; among them, 509 women. For 2024, there are registrations for 15 groups with about 12 to 15 participants each.

3.2 Concept and Programme

Before Fernweh Fair Travel - Uplifting Communities (FFT) was even conceived, it was already decided that opportunities should be created for widows, underprivileged people, and women to earn additional income through their own efforts, thus improving their living conditions. Providing monetary support without creating jobs for the target group was excluded from the start.

Given the region's lack of opportunities for paid employment, the founder decided to establish a foundation for tourism. The alpine landscape, with its forests, vast green open valleys, snow-covered, glaciated mountains, rich wildlife, and numerous temples, was perfectly suited for hiking and trekking trips. The very conservative rural region, largely untouched except for the valleys, offered a pristine environment. The fear and respect of the locals for the powers and spirits of the forests, and the abodes of the gods, have protected the forests and wildlife to this day; nature remains intact. For tourists seeking nature or spiritual experiences, it presents a rewarding destination.

Women's associations, widows, and the poor showed interest. Before training began, a lengthy process was undertaken to obtain the consent of all key individuals - a years-long effort of persuasion. Accommodation facilities had to be created, and skills for hosting and catering to guests were trained. Hygienic foundations were also established, benefiting the local families. The food offerings were expanded, partly thanks to permaculture cultivation methods.

The founder had to pre-finance many initiatives. FFT was established to facilitate coordination, advertising, and bookings. Registrations and bookings for the homestays are passed directly and then individually settled. So far, there is only one homestay large enough to accommodate groups. The work in the homestays - kitchen, garden, service, cleaning - is taken on or shared by women from the respective villages, ensuring that work and income are distributed among many. Hiking and trekking routes were developed, and drivers and guides were trained. Lunches are taken in a "private" setting at one of the village women's homes, particularly widows. The local women cook local dishes, creating new income opportunities. For a group of 10/15 participants, the revenue (all food sourced from their own gardens) can quickly match the monthly wage of a worker. A portion of the income is used for projects in communities or schools.

Annually, no more than about 15 groups with a maximum of 15 participants each (particularly groups from Europe/USA are preferred, as they often pay better for nature, adventure, hiking, and spiritual experiences despite simple accommodations) and a maximum of 1000 to 1500 individual travelers will be accepted. This is to prevent endangering the community in the settlements, to preserve traditions, and to maintain cultural uniqueness. No one should become completely dependent on tourism.

4 Assessment according to the TO DO Award criteria

The comparison of the activities of Fernweh Fair Travel - Uplifting Communities (FFT) with the TO DO Award competition criteria leads to the following assessment:

4.1. Participation

How were the interests and needs of the local population included in the planning phase and throughout the project?

The primary interest of the founder, Poonam Rawat-Hahne, was the empowerment and integration of young widows, victims of domestic violence, and underprivileged individuals, predominantly women in agricultural enterprises. In 2011, long before the establishment of FFT, she had the idea to discuss her proposals with the village women's groups. They showed high interest in collaborating, especially in the opportunity to find paid employment.

Subsequently, it became essential to obtain approval for her plans and those of the regional women from all authorities (politicians, religious leaders, elders, village heads). Without their approval, it would have been impossible to realize these plans. Five years filled with persuasive efforts had to pass before changes could be initiated. Without the participation of all stakeholders, the plans would never have been implemented. FFT was then founded in 2016. To this day, all experiences, steps, changes, adjustments, and training measures are continuously discussed with and actively supported by the involved women. Sustainable 'community-based' structures are being reinforced. The fundamental criterion of 'participation' for the award is fully met.

4.2. Economic Benefit

Ensuring the economic participation of as many local population groups as possible in the tourism industry

99% of all employees are from the region. Women's groups from 14 villages and communities are now involved and contribute their experiences. Two women from the region are entrusted with management tasks. This number is expected to increase, but currently, there are no women qualified for these roles. 557 individuals, of whom about 90% are women, have directly participated in the tourism initiatives.

Most women are responsible for household chores, childcare, animal care, and home gardening. Almost no one can take on a regular, full-time job. Therefore, many participants share the various tasks that arise. This results in far more people being involved in the tourism project than would be the case with full-time employment. High management effort and coordination are required, but it works.

Various activities have emerged: Direct income is earned by the homestays. Direct income from preparing meals for groups primarily benefits widowed, single mothers. Income from handicrafts and crafts (e.g., basket weaving, small souvenirs) goes directly to the producers. Local farmers also earn direct income from selling fish, vegetables, fruits, milk, chickens; almost exclusively from local organic farming.

Paid jobs are available in the homestays (cleaning, service, gardening, cooking) and for office tasks: management, coordination, as well as for drivers and guides.

For U.S./European standards, the earnings are low. However, in areas where participation in the monetary economy is minimal, and subsistence farming is dominant, even small amounts of money are significant (for clothing, shoes, hygiene products, medical care).

4.3. Raising Awareness

Promoting awareness of opportunities and risks of tourism development for the economic, social, and cultural daily life of the local population

Regular meetings are held by the women's groups in the village, where all arising problems or concerns are addressed. All participating women remain involved in their domestic routines; their daily lives continue. With few exceptions, everyone works part-time. However, the new work opportunities are encouraging for the women. They realize that their dependencies in a patriarchal society are being reduced. Earning money is an important step towards equality with men.

The requirement that tourism should not become a main source of income is also met. The focus remains on the previous work. Village life is intended to be preserved. For this reason, the number of guests is deliberately kept limited. Life in the villages remains largely unchanged; agriculture continues to be the main livelihood.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphatically shown all those involved how important and correct it is to limit income and thus dependence on tourism - it has become evident that tourism development does not always move in a positive direction. **Cultural Identity**

4.4. Strengthening the local culture and cultural identity, avoiding/minimizing social and cultural damages caused by tourism, and supporting intercultural encounters and exchanges between hosts and guests

Guests, particularly those in group travel, are informed about regional and local conditions before their journey. There is a list of do's and don'ts. A recurring issue is clothing. Therefore, a dress code is recommended for female visitors: wearing long pants combined with a wide, long blouse, which is similar to Indian women's clothing. Since such expectations have been clearly set, there are rarely any problems.

Due to the poverty and isolation of the region, modern, culture-changing influences are slow to penetrate. Nevertheless, traditional everyday craft products are gradually being displaced by cheap plastic products or mass-produced goods. Therefore, it is crucial that handcrafted products (such as baskets woven from reeds and rushes, knitted and woven items) are made as souvenirs. Crafts remain or are revived. Music bands are a part of weddings and festivals. If a family has (small) additional income, they often hire more musicians for festivities. Music traditions are preserved and reinvigorated.

4.5. Decent Work

Creation of qualified job positions and/or improvement of working conditions in tourism in terms of social security, working hours, education and training, as well as remuneration

The mostly simple tasks in rural, village tourism are remunerated and offer flexible working hours. There are ongoing training measures in hygiene, cooking, permaculture gardening, and understanding guests' needs, which are important forms of education and training. The work does not provide social security; safety continues to rely on the protection offered by the family. However, the work in the house, with animals, and children is certainly harder and more demanding than tasks in tourism. Working and living conditions improve significantly. The prospect of a better life prevents or slows down migration to regions and cities that "promise" better working conditions.

4.6. Gender Equality

Equal participation of women and men in the planning and realization process within the framework of their cultural foundations and values

The "value" of women who contribute financially to the household through their work is enhanced. From the beginning, FFT aimed to provide a better life perspective for women, widows, and underprivileged people. This has been achieved. Over 90% of all participants are women. They take on jobs that didn't exist before. This does not mean that men are excluded. Men are hired for construction, heavy labor, and as drivers. Also in the management area (e.g., leader of a large homestay), there are male employees, because there are no women with sufficient qualifications - qualified Indian women are even less likely to work in rural areas than men.

4.7. Environmental Compatibility

Consideration of criteria for environmental and climate compatibility as well as sustainable management of natural resources

Conservation of nature and the environment is a priority for FFT. The intact forests and their wildlife are essential for FFT's existence. The environment is a part of the capital of this region. Collecting trash, bringing it back, and "leaving no trace" are mandatory for hikes and excursions.

Poonam is a proponent of permaculture. Garden plants that complement and benefit each other are grown and remain in place throughout the year. They usually require no protection against pests. Salads, spices, and fruits from the permaculture garden are a healthy, high-quality addition to all meals. Poonam regularly imparts this necessary knowledge at events. Purchased local food is almost always organically grown.

Environmental or climate impacts from tourism are not an issue here, locally.

4.8. Securing the Future

Ensuring the economic and institutional sustainability of the project

Bookings and reservations before the pandemic promised a very successful year in 2019. However, almost none of that materialized, the same as in the following years. It wasn't until 2023 that the first groups from Europe started returning. During this period, FFT had minimal income.

For 2024, a successful year can be predicted. Despite the long downturn, training in all areas continued, homestays were renovated, and FFT now operates a large, expanded homestay particularly suitable for groups. The spacious, comfortable rooms have private bathrooms and toilets, and offer bedding in the European style. The most frequent complaint about the lack of espresso or cappuccino was resolved by purchasing a coffee machine. There is also internet access.

A retreat center is in the planning stages. Whether it's for retreats, yoga, hiking, high mountain excursions, or participating in agriculture, the range of diverse holiday options is being expanded.

Improved living and working conditions contribute to preventing the migration from the valleys.

5. CONCLUSION

FFT - Uplifting Communities stands and evolves on a very stable, widely accepted participatory, sustainable foundation. Many individuals have wholeheartedly embraced tourism activities, significantly improving the quality of life for their families. This is true not just in monetary terms but also in aspects of nutrition, hygiene, environmental awareness, and self-esteem. Particularly, the fates of widows and the underprivileged have been positively affected.

In recent years, revenues were scarce, but the time was used for improvements. The prospects for future development are promising, thanks to numerous inquiries and reservations. It seems that the capacities could be fully utilized in 2024.

Of course, uncertainties remain. Could FFT survive another pandemic? Will tourism remain stable despite the globally tense security situation? However, similar future challenges are faced by all sectors of the economy worldwide.

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