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Kumar Anubhav started his sustainable tourism platform NotOnMap in 2016.

Giving up data analytics to promote the village life

Shail Desai

Whenever Delhi-based Kumar Anubhav needed time away from his corporate job, he would pack his bag and set out to travel. On most occasions, his destination would be off the beaten track, somewhere high up in Uttarakhand or in France's vast countryside.

What drew Anubhav, 40, to these places was their rich cultural heritage. While wandering through these places, two things always bothered him: the residents' indifference towards their pristine environment and their desire to migrate to larger towns and cities in search of work. He decided he'd like to find a way to solve both problems by creating opportunities in villages.

The journey begins

After completing a degree in electronics and telecommunications from Delhi Technological University, Anubhav set out on his corporate journey, working at companies including Inductis, American Express and CPA Global. During a business trip to Amsterdam in 2014, he took some time out to explore nearby towns. It was then that he realized that travel was his true calling.

After spending 11 years in the field of data analytics, he quit his job at software firm Intuit and set up NotOnMap, a sustainable tourism startup, in 2016.

The idea for the startup came to Anubhav while he was travelling in Chamba in Himachal Pradesh where he met a young man working at a hotel. "He was from a nearby village, Chaminoo, where he lived in a traditional mud house. I asked him if he was willing to return home and work in his own village, if I paid him the same salary every month," says Anubhav. Though the young man was sceptical, he agreed.

"That was the start of an idea," Anubhav says. His idea was to train young people in villages to host guests from other parts of the country and the world. "There were initial concerns about how they would earn money if it didn't click. I had to give them assurances," he says.

In the next few days, Anubhav organized the young man's home in Chaminoo to make it comfortable for guests, and started spreading the word. The stay was meant to offer an authentic experience of the culture in remote hills, including local cuisine, nature and the rural way of life. Travellers started pouring in once word spread. Within four months, Anubhav had made enough money to cover the young man's previous salary.

"The idea was to focus on distress migration, which was common in these villages. They had manpower, but all of them were unskilled. If I could create an enterprise for them in their own village, they would feel empowered and it would be enough reason for them to stay back," he explains.

Anubhav says his family's support was constant. "As a student, I worked on issues affecting village communities, so they have seen me develop a connect with them. They were happy to let me follow my path," he says.

Where success lies

In the next few months, Anubhav started a pilot project in Bhaloli, a village near Khajjiar. He hired five residents, spruced up their homes, started a self-help group in the community and documented their heritage. He promoted the place as "Mystic Village", and in just three weeks, generated six months worth of salary for the folks who had joined his project.

"When you're creating something, you have to sacrifice. I invested my savings and my friend, Sandeep Kumar, helped me with some funding. Even today we haven't collected revenue from a number of communities, because we want them to grow first. My business background gives me an idea on how things are shaping up," claims Anubhav. "The success in Bhaloli gave me real motivation to continue my work."

Today, NotOnMap works in the field of impact tourism with communities from 10 states, including Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Goa.

Travellers not only experience the traditional way of village life, but also interact with residents through workshops and activities like pottery. Some Indian travellers have sought permanent relationships with their hosts, inviting them to their own homes in the metros, setting up libraries in the village and even mentoring students, he says.

"Travel should have a direct, positive impact for the traveller as well as the host. The two-way relationship ensures that both benefit from it. I call it inclusive participation," Anubhav says.

Last month, NotOnMap received a €250,000 grant from travel aggregator Booking.com as part of their Booster Programme for sustainable startups. Earlier this year, they were invited to the International Conference on Creativity and Innovation for Grassroots in Ahmedabad, where they explained the sustainability of their venture. The community model and the heritage in these villages also draw research students from institutes such as Indian Institute of Technology and National Institute of Fashion Technology.

In the months ahead, Anubhav wants to start operations in Nagaland and Sikkim. "I'm trying to create a movement in the country so that every village community that has preserved its heritage becomes self-sustainable. They already have the assets, you just need to fine-tune them."

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