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PEOPLE & CULTURE

A new project is taking stories from India's villages to the world

COVID has wrecked tourism-supported communities across the country. Voices of Rural India hopes to reskill those affected and help them tell their stories to the world

BY CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER

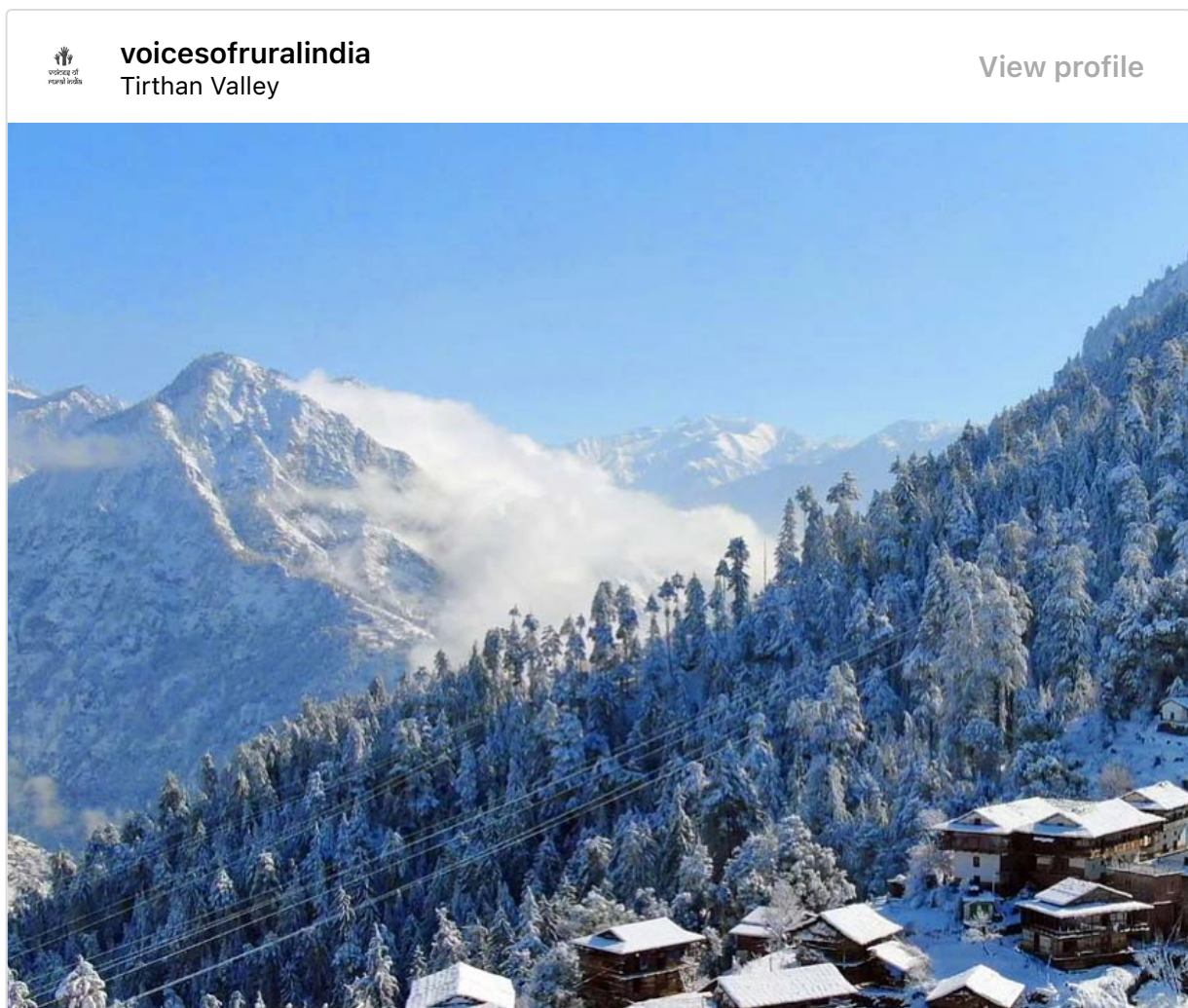
18 August 2020

There's a postman from Ladakh who is fascinated by petroglyphs from the Bronze Age; in Himachal's Tirthan Valley a festival has men wear

clothes of grass and yell abuses to provoke bad spirits; in rural **Maharashtra**, there's a community that worships tigers—these are some of the thousands of fascinating stories from around India that are yet to break out into the world. Now, a new project hopes to do just that, while empowering rural communities with digital storytelling skills to cope with the COVID-induced disruption of livelihoods.

Voices of Rural India

The **Voices of Rural India** platform is exactly what it sounds like: a place where stories from India's hinterland meet a global audience. These stories are for anyone but “particularly [for] people interested in responsible and meaningful travel, and curious about the local heritage, arts and life in rural India,” says Shivya Nath, one of the founders. To them, it's a great way to make a virtual journey into these cultures, and perhaps even start planning actual trips for some time in the future.





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The first story on Voices of Rural India - "In the cold Himalayan winter, a celebration to warm the heart" - comes all the way from the Tirthan Valley in Himachal Pradesh!

Soniya Thakur, who grew up in the mountain village of Bihar (yes, a village there, not the state!), writes about a month-long celebration of local delicacies during Magh Mahina - and how things are different from the stories she heard from her grandfather.

Head over to voicesofruralindia.org or the link in our bio and read it in English or hear the audio version in Hindi!

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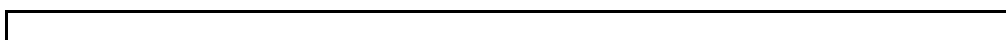
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The initiative has been put forth by Nath, author one of India's most widely read travel blogs, [The Shooting Star](#); Malika Viridi, founder-director of [Himalayan Ark](#), a community-based tourism organisation in the Munsiyari, Uttarakhand and Osama Manzar, founding member of the [Digital Empowerment Foundation](#) that has provided the incubation fund.

Here's The Thing

Get all the hot tips on where to stay, where to eat and what to do across India and the world



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Reskilling India

The team has partnered with several community [tourism](#) organisations who've already been working closely with the local community over the years. These include Global Himalayan Expedition, Spiti Ecosphere, Grassroutes Journeys etc. “They help us identify the storytellers—typically guides, homestay hosts, people involved in tourism, and youth and women from the community. Our team and urban volunteer network help flesh out these ideas further.”

Training takes place virtually—material translated in the local language is sent over Whatsapp to be shared with the creators. The focus is on basic storytelling: brainstorming story ideas, bringing a personal perspective into the story, smartphone photography tips etc. “The first draft is developed by the storytellers and the process of feedback continues until the story is ready for publishing.”

“Over time, we hope the storytellers will acquire the skills to capture their stories digitally—through audio, the written word, video and photography. Some are now learning to type in Hindi. We gradually hope to bring them on social media (responsibly)—and leverage online tools for their own tourism or other side businesses.”

Importantly, this is a paid gig. “Each storyteller whose story is accepted for publishing currently gets paid a fee of Rs1,000. We are currently exploring a pyramid model where more contributions (and hence more skill development) lead to an increased fee. The goal is to gradually pay at par with online publications.” And the mission is to upgrade rural India's digital skills, while preserving grassroots knowledge that is slowly disappearing.

How you can help

Appreciate: Read and share these stories to encourage the creators.

Donate: You can also contribute with funds [here](#), or send a sponsor their way.

Volunteer: VoRI is open for (virtual) volunteers with editing and social media expertise. It's also looking for creative volunteers to help develop training material that can be disseminated in a fun and engaging way.

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