

SEWA's innovative approach for Generating Livelihood using Digital Technology – A Case Study

Five kilometers off the NH-27 from Santalpur in Patan lies the village of Bakutra. The arid village, bordering the Little Rann of Kutch, is home to Gauriben Brahman's house, which is thronged by a large number of visitors from across the world, who cut the dusty roads in their SUVs to experience the taste of rural Gujarat.

Listed on Airbnb, one of the biggest aggregators of bed-and-breakfast facilities globally, Gauriben's thatched roof house has three small rooms with neatly lined cots topped by hand-embroidered sheets, iron almirahs, and freshly polished copper and aluminum vessels arrayed neatly in a row atop a wooden plank. In sharp contrast lies a guest kit containing small sachets of shampoo, a toothbrush, toothpaste and tissues. The Indian-style bathroom, obviously not attached, as it stands away from the house in the courtyard, has a toilet roll hanging from an ingeniously tied rope. There is no running water, but women come running with a bucketful of water whenever needed.

Gauriben, who never attended school, is an earnest host while welcoming guests. She offers them the traditional vermilion-rice tika. As the guests settle down, she asks in broken but confident English - "Tea with sugar? No sugar? Milk? No milk?" When the guests nod to signal tea with no sugar, she rushes inside the kitchen to prepare the steaming cuppa, to be served with a smile!



Figure 1: physicist Arjen Vredenberg and his psychologist wife Janie Van Dijk from Netherlands.

Gauriben's adherence to the "Atithi devo bhava" credo is made more diligent by fact that while her family earns INR 45,000 a year harvesting two crops, she alone earned INR 55,000 in December. That was her highest earning; on an average, she has been making INR 30,000 per month ever since she listed her house on Airbnb in June. With business steadily rising, Gauriben says she is confident that her three sons will not have to go looking for petty labor jobs anymore.

Over the months, she has picked up a few necessary words in English. She said. "*There were hiccups initially. But now guests marvel at our cooking of "bajri-rotlas" (traditional pearl-millet bread) on wooden chulhas. My daughters-in-law and I have learnt to make "shak" (veg curry) with less oil and chilly, which guests can't tolerate!*"

Some tourists were keen to learn to pat "rotlas" with hands; others wanted embroidery lessons. Gauriben persuaded her sister Shanti to list her house and helped her earn INR 45,000 last month. Now both sisters are looking forward to expanding their new enterprise which will help change their family's fortunes.

Gauriben's village is 100-odd km away from Dholavira, one of the most significant Indus Valley Civilization sites in India in the Rann of Kutch, and makes the perfect midway stopover. Apart from lodging and boarding, guests are also offered taste of the "night life" as they are encouraged to shake a leg to traditional raas-garba (Gujarati folk dance) tunes to the beats of dhols (Indian Drums), especially organized for guests who are lent chaniya-cholis (embroidered traditional rural women's dress) and kediyas (embroidered traditional rural men's dress) by the villagers!

Gauri and Shanti's entrepreneurial success is part of the 'Hum Sab Ek Hain' initiative launched by Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in collaboration with Airbnb in 2017, to allow its rural members to tap into new forms

of livelihood opportunities. The initiative started with nine listings and has now grown to 50 houses in Patan, Mehsana, Chhota Udaipur, Surendranagar and Aravalli.

Reema Nanavaty, Director of Economic and Rural Development, SEWA says "*The 'Hum Sab Ek Hain' initiative was an attempt to explore new livelihood models for rural women members of SEWA. While expansion is on the cards in Gujarat, we are all set to take the collaboration to Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu & Kashmir, Assam, Sikkim, and Nagaland in line with our pan-India agreement with Airbnb.*"

Initially, SEWA appointed tech-savvy women as hosts in each of the homes till the homeowners caught up with technology to take bookings and answer queries. SEWA has also developed a training module to empower women to manage the platform themselves after a certain stage.

40-year old Mayaben from Mehsana district of Gujarat has only studied till class 7. Recently, she hosted her house under the "Hum Sab Ek Hai" initiative. Till early last year, Mayaben was struggling to pay the school fees of her two children. Last month she earned INR 80,000. She says "*Business is pouring in and I had to rent a neighboring house to host groups and families. Often, when guests arrive in groups of 25-30, I hire village women to cook for them. Thus, the initiative has not only given me a means of earning livelihood but also opened up employment opportunities for my neighborhood. It has changed our lives. My children are learning hotel management in their own village. They will automatically become successful entrepreneurs.*" Mayaben's husband, a daily wageer husband, earns around INR 5,000 per month. He is very supportive and helps her in running the business.

The guests, on their part, bear with certain inconveniences, but do so happily. "*We wished to experience the real India, A home-stay in a village where we will be served authentic home-cooked food — in a setting of limited luxury — will open our minds to the lives lived by millions of Indians.*" said Arjen who is on an India tour with his wife.

William came to Bakutra with a group of engineers from Australia. They built a chimney using an aluminum tub and PVC pipe to suck out fumes from Gauriben's kitchen. In his review message on AirBnB, William wrote a message for Gauriben... "*Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I will learn so much about India through your hospitality. Hope the chimney serves you well.*"