



India

## The Resilience of Women in India's Travel Industry

In India's tourism biz, women operators faced some of the hardest setbacks during the last two years, yet their spirit to overcome these pandemic-induced challenges remains indefatigable.



Illustration by: Malavika Sivaraju

BY Megan Goyette POSTED ON March 8, 2022

The Union Territory of Ladakh, with its tall mountains displaying rippled hues of reds and browns, and lofty ridges rising from the region's river valleys, is renowned for its rugged beauty. Lurking in the mountains are saline lakes and sand dunes, extraterrestrial elements that compose a Mars-like ecosystem. Since the region officially opened to tourists in the 1970s, it has steadily grown in popularity to become one of India's best known trekking destinations for visitors both from within and outside the country today.

Thinlas Chorol, 45, started Ladakh's first-ever all-female trekking company in 2009. Chorol's company hires and trains local female guides and hosts guests at homestays run by women. In an industry that men have long dominated, Chorol and her female guides redefined the social norms that long dictated female participation in the Himalayas.

These days, Ladakh faces a steep pandemic-induced economic upheaval. Country-wide lockdowns and the cancellation of tourist visas sent India's tourism-dependent economies, including Ladakh, into shock. No tourist visas were issued between March 2020 and November 2021, when the Indian government shut the country's borders to try and control the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the world, there is concern the socio-economic impact of the pandemic will stall the progress of women. During times of economic recession, women and girls





During my conversations with Indian women in the tourism industry, from Ladakh to Bengaluru, they described challenges of economic hardship, shifting family dynamics, and the lack of a comprehensive system of support.

Yet, there was a sense of community, hope, and resilience within these women, despite the odds.

According to Chorol, many of her female staff are their families' chief income earners. When stay-at-home orders halted the flow of tourists to Ladakh, Chorol and her female guides could no longer operate the same treks that once sustained their livelihoods.

"Most of the guides are dependent on the tourist season to sustain themselves and their families for the whole year," said Chorol.

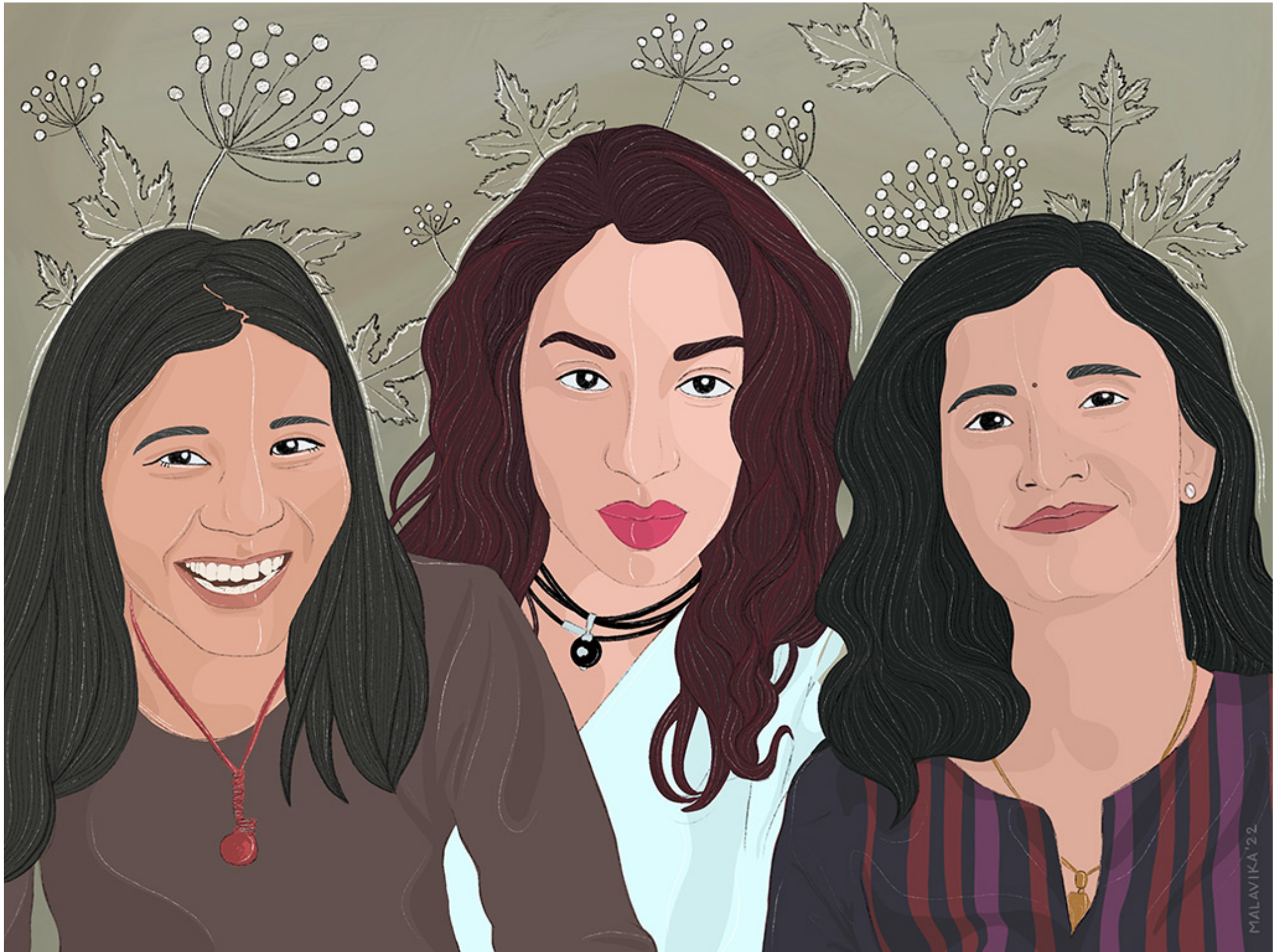


Illustration by: Malavika Sivaraju

The lockdown materialised a harrowing reality: small travel businesses such as Chorol's were forced to shut their doors. Job prospects and income flow changed overnight, stamping a seal of uncertainty for the foreseeable future.

Looking to fight this tide, Chorol launched a crowdsourced campaign in the summer of 2020 to clean up the mountains, an operation that would pay her female guides to collect garbage along their trekking routes. Chorol used the crowdsourcing platform *wemakeit* to bring her idea to life. It was not long before Chorol and her community disseminated the online campaign through social networks and raised nearly ₹460,133.

Since Ladakh's tourism boom, trekkers have polluted its mountains, leaving plastic bottles, empty tins, and food wrappers en route. These pollutants are deposited into rivers by rain and snowmelt, contaminating the local watersheds and threatening the public health of the region's mountain communities.

The goal of Chorol's campaign was twofold: generate income for her unemployed guides and clean up the mountains.

As India remained closed off to tourists, eight of Chorol's guides spent 10 days in Nymaling and the Khangtse base camp collecting trash and hauling it back to Leh for proper disposal. The women worked with the People's Action Group for Inclusion and Rights, which runs a recycling plant operated by Ladakhis with various special needs.

Chorol's female trekking guides received ₹30,000-40,000 for their efforts, an amount equal to their typical seasonal salary.





Chorol points women to starting "other businesses which depend on the local market." Chorol herself is thinking of starting a soap business.

Research indicates that women are a key ingredient to economic success. From organisations across the world such as the French Development Agency and the International Monetary Fund, there is sweeping consensus that women are a powerful and indispensable tool for curbing poverty.

Unflagging despite setbacks, Chorol and her female guides work to do just this. They are laying the groundwork to revive Ladakh—both economically and environmentally.

All the way in India's south, a woman named Radhika Subramanian, 36, is caught in the same dry spell. In 2019, just months before the virus first began to spread, Subramanian spearheaded a travel company in Bengaluru with the mission to transform education through experiential learning and travel to some of Karnataka's most remote areas. Foreign students were the client base Subramanian envisioned.

With the government's cancellation of tourist visas, Subramanian pivoted. Uncertain of when a return to something like normal might happen, she formed a new business model.

"Initially, I was upset," Subramanian said, "it's like you take off on a flight, and immediately you have to land."

Subramanian re-envisioned her model into a domestic travel company.

"The initial dream of bringing experiential travel to students has been put down for a while," Subramanian said. "I reinvented myself and my organisation to match our values and see how we can possibly create an impact."

There is a divide among urban and rural communities in India. Education attainment, labour choices, consumption, and wages converge as you travel beyond the borders of the city. Engineering new bridges between these two populations excited Subramanian.



Illustration by: Malavika Sivaraju

"People thought I'm crazy," Subramanian said. To start a rural travel company during this uncertain time, albeit domestically, entailed a lot of work.

Subramanian sketched out and brought to life a risk-reduction travel experience for local Indians to Karnataka's most remote areas.



Seeing that the situation was particularly bleak for many local artisans whose economic lifeline relies on foreign tourists, Subramanian launched a crowdsourcing campaign to provide groceries to local families.

Like Chorol, Subramanian used an online platform to bring her idea to life. Subramanian raised enough money to provide food aid to over 150 artist families in Karnataka's most remote areas. The families received staple items in bulk, including dal, sunflower oil, spices, and bath soap. With food security still on the rise, Subramanian has been working to continue this effort throughout rural communities in Raghurajpur.

The quiet, unyielding work of Subramanian is a powerful picture of how women are stepping up to determine what the world looks like after the pandemic.

Meanwhile, in Uttarakhand, a woman named Poonam Rawat-Hahne, 45, hopes to keep her travel company afloat.

Growing up, Rawat-Hahne never lived in one place longer than three years. Her father was an officer in the Indian Army.

In 2003, the same year her father died, Rawat-Hahne was inspired to open a shelter for distressed and underprivileged women in Uttarakhand's remote villages. Between Rawat-Hahne's savings and the pension her mother was receiving, she was able to get the shelter up and running.

Rawat-Hahne quickly discovered that providing shelter was not enough to improve the livelihoods of these women, most of whom were widows. The women needed to generate sustainable incomes to support their children.

In 2015, Rawat-Hahne devised a strategy to bring a financial boost to the rural communities of Uttarakhand. Working with the women at the shelter, they conceived a travel company that centers on values of sustainable tourism and female empowerment. The women have hosted groups from all over the world in their villages while working as cooks, village guides, trip managers, and community representatives.

When the pandemic hit, Rawat-Hahne's travel company closed its doors. "It was heartbreaking. Of course, everybody was heartbroken, but you know, that's how it is. I think all over the world people suffered. So that's how it was," she said. "You have to adapt."

The women Rawat-Hahne employed went back to doing what they used to do: working on farms and looking after livestock. This drastic setback threatens to limit prospects and earnings for women and children for years down the road.

Today, Rawat-Hahne's doors remain shut. For many businesses such as Rawat-Hahne's, there has been no real option but to be patient. However, this has not stopped Rawat-Hahne from unearthing inspiration from the pandemic to make her business even better once things go back to normal. She hopes to expand and grow the company's offerings and take on new sustainability challenges.

All three women, while geographically separated across the country, are inextricably linked together. Each described how they are clinging to hope amidst these difficult times.

After 19 months of closed borders, the Indian government announced in October that it was reopening its borders to foreign tourists. The country began granting tourist visas to travellers arriving on chartered flights. Beginning on November 15, this was extended to foreign travellers arriving on commercial flights.

Even with this hopeful shift, the impact on the economic landscape will continue to persist. Some experts expect that travel will peak with reopened borders. This could help compensate for the period that these women and families had to close shop. But until the economy fully bounces back, India's tourism industry will remain too unpredictable to rely on for the coming months.

Meanwhile, these women are a critical economic asset for India and significant figures in determining what the country looks like after the pandemic.

"We have a long way to go," said Subramanian. But they have no intention of giving up. Together, these women illustrate a deeply human picture of community, hope, and resilience in dark times.

*To read more stories on travel, cities, food, nature, and adventure, head to our [web forum here](#) or our [new National Geographic Traveller India app here](#).*

## A D V E R T I S E M E N T



# NGTI CLASSICS



The Best Reads From  
NGTI Archives



**Megan Goyette** studied policy analysis at Cornell University and now works in data governance at The New York Times. She loves running in Brooklyn, long swims in the ocean, and reading the newspaper in print. Formerly living in Uttar Pradesh, Megan can never say no to a chai.

## COMMENTS

➔ Please [Login](#) to comment

## TAGS

[Himachal Pradesh](#) [INDIA](#) [Ladakh](#) [Leh](#) [Tourism](#) [Women Travellers](#) [Women's Day](#)

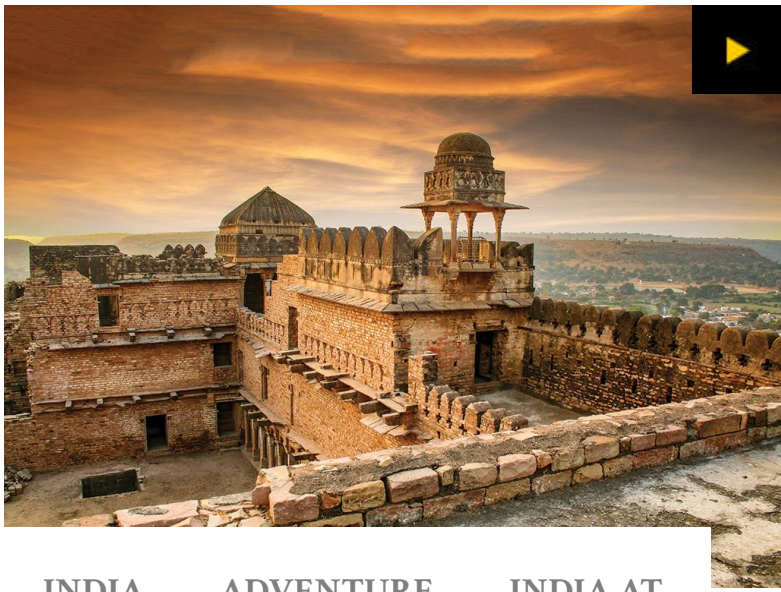
PSST. WANT A WEEKLY DOSE OF TRAVEL INSPIRATION IN YOUR INBOX?

Enter Your Email

SUBMIT







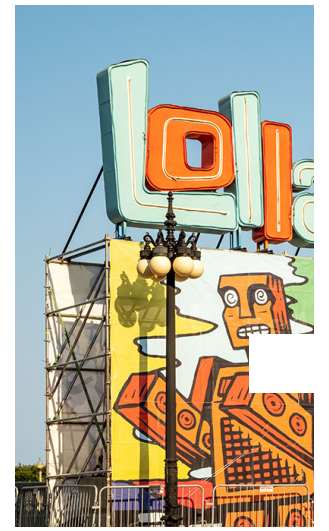
INDIA ADVENTURE INDIA AT 75

### All Roads Lead to India



INDIA WILDLIFE

### Where Are India's Newest Tiger Reserves?



INDIA NEW

### Lollapalooza Geared Up to

## DESTINATIONS

- [Goa](#)
- [Jharkhand](#)
- [Kenya](#)
- [Scotland](#)
- [Spain](#)
- [Tibet](#)

## MAILING LISTS

Sign up for more inspiring photos, stories, and special offers from National Geographic.

## QUICK LINKS

- [About Us](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Terms Of Use](#)
- [Uncover The Epic](#)

## POPULAR TAGS

- FAMILY TIME
- NATURE
- RAJASTHAN
- MAHARASHTRA
- ASIA
- ADVENTURE
- CITIES
- EUROPE
- CULTURE
- HERITAGE
- COVID-19
- INDIA
- WILDLIFE
- GUIDE
- FOOD AND DRINK

© 2022. All rights reserved. Crafted by Togglehead.

