

A CASE STUDY ON SEWA ECOTOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Shree Vanalakshmi Ganeshpura Mahila Sewa Vruksh Utpadak Sahkari Mandli Ltd, created with the intention to provide employment to marginal women in Ganeshpura village, situated in the Mehsana district of Gujarat, is now an Eco-Tourism center too. It started with 41 women, who transformed barren 10-acre land into an irrigated plot growing various fruits, vegetables, various types of ayurvedic plants, trees, etc. The entire model is unique in nature supporting the self-reliance of these SEWA sisters. The visitors enjoy its beauty, nature, Gujarati food, culture, organic fruits and vegetables, and the peace of this place.

Keywords: *Ecopreneurs, Ecotourism, Employment, Rural, SEWA.*

SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)

A trade union based in Ahmedabad, India, called the SEWA, which means "Service" in the Indian language, originated to defend the rights of low-income, self-sufficiently employed women workers. In 1972, Ela Bhatt, a labour lawyer, and organiser founded SEWA. The union originated

from Gandhiji's Textile Labour Association (TLA); a trade union founded by him in 1918 (Spodek, 1994). SEWA is a member-driven organization in 18 states that represents almost 2.5 million workers (SEWA, 2023). SEWA is committed to ensuring that women have access to full employment, revenue, food, and economic assistance, including a wellness programme, social security, child care, insurance, and accommodation (Chen, Bonner, and Carre, 2015). SEWA is the oldest and largest female trade union in India and promoted sisterhood, which encourages women to take control of their lives and advance rights such as land and employment (Bhalia, 2012).

THE BEGINNING- SHREE VANLAXMI GANESH PURA MAHILA SEWA VRUKSH UTPADAK SAHKARI MANDLI LTD

The SEWA's grassroots leaders and organizers visited Ganeshpura village, situated in Kadi block of the Mehsana district in the late 1980s, and tried to learn about the women as well as the community's problems. SEWA started its operations in the Mehsana district in 1986 with the agriculture wage-earning women. In various meetings that

were held with these women, the chief problems highlighted by them were sustaining the family, educating children, and having a steady source of income. As these women were landless, they couldn't even purchase and rear cattle. During the seasons of harvesting agricultural crops, they got work for 10-15 days a month in the land of the rich farmers. For the rest of the month, they were forced to stay at home. This greatly affected their ability to manage their family. They were unable to afford a good education for their children. During the meetings that followed, representatives from SEWA tried to find out the availability of unirrigated 'gauchar' land in the village. The women confirmed the availability of such land. On further discussion, it was decided that a demand will be put forth to the village panchayat to provide such free land to the SEWA members for irrigation. In the year 1989, 10 acres of land were received by SEWA from the panchayat on a lease of 30 years.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND DILIGENCE

Three years later, they finally acquired a thirty-year lease and registered their business after facing hisses, jokes, and abuses from district officials and village men. The land received was completely barren and badly needed proper landscaping. The women took up the challenge. While uprooting the plants to level the land, various poisonous animals including snakes would come out of their hidings. However, this and other disturbances never deteriorated the spirit of the members and they continued to work ceaselessly until the levelling of land was completed. Trees were then planted on the 10 acres of levelled land. Soon they realized there was another major problem.

This land had no particular provisions for water. As a result, the women had to walk nearly 1.5 kilometres every day to the village to get water, and then water the newly sown seeds and samplings. To solve this problem of availability of water they decided to build their own pond where they could collect and store "rainwater". In order to build such a pond, the members got the training for making plastic ponds from the Indian Petroleum Company Limited (IPCL) and later these trained women themselves built a 10-foot-deep plastic pond.

After growing trees, the women members decided to start agricultural work on this land. So, they divided the plot of land into equal parts. Seasonal crops were to be sown on each of these parts. Each divided plot was given a specific number and these numbers were then written on pieces of paper. Each member picked up one such piece and she had to irrigate the land corresponding to the respective number picked up. However, the members lacked sufficient tools for such agricultural work. With respect to this need, the Hindustan Petroleum Company Limited (HPCL) provided the required tools worth Rs.1,650,00 to the cooperative. In the year 1988-89, SEWA had a bore well built on this land which provided enough water for the farmers to have 2 harvest crops in a year. The basic agriculture expenses for the crop were borne by the cooperative group. Out of the total earnings, two parts were received by the group, and one part was kept by the member. With the help of the research done by the Jagudan Centre of the Gujarat Agricultural University, scientific techniques in tree plantation, division of agricultural land, and inter-cropping had been applied by the cooperative. In this way,

the Shree VanlaxmiGaneshpuraMahila Sewa VrukshUtpadakSahkari Mandli Ltd was created and started working towards self-sustainability.

MODUS OPERANDI OF TRIP INITIATION

To promote the Eco-tourist destination, a website had been created for SEWA Eco-Tourism. A Facebook page too had been created which highlighted the visitors who visited the place with their photographs, feedback, etc. The visitors willing to visit the place contacted the concerned resource person through a call and confirmed the number of people coming to visit the Eco-tourism place. The resource people made the arrangements for food and hospitality accordingly. The trip charged a nominal amount of Rs.400 per adult and Rs.200 per child below 10 years of age. The trip started in the morning and ended by 5.00 to 6.00 pm in the evening. The home page of the website is displayed in Exhibit-2.

KEY ATTRACTIONS

Visiting SEWA Eco-Tourism situated in the Ganeshpura Village proves to be a unique experience for visitors. It proves to be living in the lap of mother nature. The rural background of this place has a charisma of its own. The tall trees rising all around, and the pleasing breeze coming from the vegetation grown all around is too mesmerizing. The key attraction points in Eco-Tourism are discussed as follows.

THE PLOT DEVELOPMENT

Watering the plot as per the requirement, appropriate cutting of the grass, proper cleaning, and maintenance of the plot was done by the

members from time to time. With the use of inter-cropping techniques, the plots were used to grow fruits as well as vegetables alternately, which were purely organic in nature. Plot boundaries were made for defining the limit of each plot. In order to create awareness about the importance of trees among students and people interested in Ayurveda, boards were made defining the name of the trees (in Hindi, English, and their scientific names) as well as narrating their uses and importance. Plantation of medicinal and ayurvedic plants like Amla, Tulsi, Bringraj, Arka, Ashoka etc. had been carried out. Also, plots had been divided and trees had been grown on them according to the various sun signs and according to the 'kundali'. The idea behind the concept was that visitors can sit in the shade of trees that relate to their sun signs and practice meditation in the serene environment, the guests could achieve peace of mind. To prevent the entry of stray wild animals into the plot, the work to develop a barbed wire around the plot is in process.

'GRAH-VAN'

Along with the sun signs, the 'Grah - planetary movements' of an individual also affected his/her relation with a tree. The members of the cooperative were being trained to make the guests understand the importance of certain trees and also to provide an understanding of how they could improve their relations with the tree, their planets, and finally the almighty God.

BAMBOO AND GRASS HUT FOR RELAXATION

Previously, the cooperative lacked the developed infrastructure where the visitors could eat or

rest. This used to create some inconvenience for the guests but later with the donation received from Ms. Kahiniben Parekh, eco-friendly huts had been made from bamboo and grass. The idea behind the concept was that visitors could sit in the cool shade of such huts, take a rest and enjoy their meals.

SPORTING AMENITIES FOR KIDS

To provide entertainment to the children visiting with their families or school picnics, a separate playground had been developed, where the children could enjoy swings, slides, see-saws and play other such games. The kids were also engaged in playing traditional games, which unfortunately are getting lost in the era of technology.

EXPERIENTIAL ENGAGEMENT

The guests were taken for the joyous camel cart ride so that they get the feel of traditional means of transportation. Some part of the plot was created in such a way that the guest could experience the desert and appreciate the importance of protecting and growing trees. Traditional music performances and sharing of experiential stories were also carried out by the women, to keep the rural cultural alive and also pass the same to others. An arrangement was also made for rare bird watching, which often were a god-sent guest to this tourism spot.

NATIONAL FLOWER ELEVATION

Pure, beautiful, and divine -the lotus flower and water lilies were grown on the pond developed at the centre of the eco-tourism spot. Also, a seating facility had been developed where visitors

who want to enjoy the beauty and serenity of the place could enjoy the mesmerizing view.

NATURAL SETTING FOR GROUP MEETINGS AND SEMINARS

To provide proper seating facilities to visiting groups and tourists, the arrangement of cots, blankets, and pillows along with the tables and chairs had been made. Presently, the seating arrangement had been made in the natural shadow of the trees. In order to reduce the inconvenience due to strong winds and excessive heat from the sun, plans had been made to develop an eco-friendly seating area.

AUTHENTIC WELCOME OF GUESTS AND ENJOYABLE MEALS

The members of the co-operative had been specifically trained on how to welcome the tourists or groups visiting the eco-tourist centre in a traditional way. The floral welcome was offered by the members by putting 'tilak' and rice on the forehead, which symbolized purity and calmness. A drummer-'dholi' played the 'dhol' and welcomed the guest, which symbolized an elegant event and cheerful courtesy. Then after, they are served a traditional drink (ginger tea, coffee, and lemon juice), traditional breakfast ('gota, bataka-poha, methithepla'), and traditional lunch ('bajara no rotlo, sukhdhi, kadhi, lasan chutney, khichadi, mix-vegetable curry, buttermilk, sev-tomato, cabbage-mutter mix'). The organic ingredients and organic vegetables provided a finger-licking taste to the food. The children and visitors often confessed that they relished the vegetable served to them in the lunch, which in reality, they refrained

from even taking in the plate when served at home. Also, special care was taken to see that the members wear an apron and a cap while preparing food and that they maintain proper cleanliness in the use of utensils. Efforts were also made to use clean and fresh napkins, bed sheets, and curtains. The women had been trained to keep the plot clean, to arrange attractive pots with plants on the roadside, and to make beautiful rangolis in the eating and the resting area. The entire ambience sparked traditionalism and excellent hospitality created a favourable cultural image in the minds of visitors.

SALE COUNTER OF RUDI PRODUCTS AND FRESHLY GROWN ORGANIC VEGETABLES

In order to have a sale of freshly grown vegetables, a kiosk of RUDI has been set up at the eco-tourist centre. At this kiosk, RUDI products along with the organic vegetables grown by the members were sold. The Rudi products included few bakery products, cereals, pulses, spices, etc which were organic in nature and grown and processed by the members.

BENEFITS TO THE VISITORS

To enrich the tradition of serving food in the Gujarati Culture, the members were trained at the Agashiya Hotel, Ahmedabad with modern hotel management techniques. Welcoming the guests, preparing rangolis, serving tea, water, breakfast, and lunch to the guests on a timely basis, maintaining cleanliness, having meetings with the visiting groups, and also providing facilities for rest and games for children as well as adults; all this was done more efficiently post-training.

The uniqueness of this concept had attracted various groups like the Rotary and Lions club, Senior Citizen Groups, School Children, College Students, various groups from Ahmedabad and Mehsana, morning walkers, SEWA Guest Groups, Yoga Practitioners, Theosophical Groups, and various other people including Foreigners who had experienced traditional Gujarati food and green environment. Till now, 3000 groups having 35000 tourists had visited the center. The pictures of the visitors at this place are displayed in Exhibit-3. Hence it can be said that the cooperative is progressing towards self-sustainability. Visitors were happy with the hospitality that they receive, the Gujarati Food which was served, and the various activities carried on in the lap of nature creating a mesmerizing experience as whole.

BENEFITS TO THE WOMEN

The women members had received training with respect to growing vegetables and fruits and processing them from the 'SEWA GramMahilaHaat'. They had learned to process mango pickles, lemon pulp juices, lemon ginger juice, lemon squash, lime squash, mix vegetable pickle etc., and increased their personal income by selling these products at fairs, exhibitions and at the center's outlets. For the past 12 years, with the use of vermicompost and organic manure, fully organic inter-cropping had been carried out on the plots allocated to the members. The members had also learnt new and scientific techniques in agriculture through the Indian Farmers Fertilizers Co-operative (IFFCO), Farmers Knowledge Centre (FKC), and from the consultancy provided by SEWA. The members were now capable of managing the cooperative themselves fully and had in the

true sense become the owners and managers of the land. The unskilled women labour force had turned into professional skilled ecopreneurs. Women in a way had become self-reliant and independent. Currently, the cooperative's members earn more than thirty times the amount they started with. Their daughters are being sent to school so they can be empowered as their mothers.

CONCLUSION

It is an incredible story of women becoming independent and earning a decent amount to

maintain their livelihood and educate their kids. It exemplifies that the toil of one's efforts can reap huge environmental and financial benefits. The destination marks a journey in the minds of the visitors that how they could contribute to protecting the culture, tradition, environment, and women's empowerment.

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Exhibit 1: Pictures of Women working in Land.



Exhibit 2: Image of Website of SEWA Ecotourism

Shree Vanlaxmi Ganeshpura Mahila Sewa Vruksh Utpadak Sahkari Mandali Ltd.

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<i>How to Reach Us ?</i>	
By Air:	Nearest Airport is Ahmedabad (62km)
By Road	Ahmedabad(51km) Mehsana (12km)
Local Transport	Non Motorred Auto Ricksha

Kudarti Mitra Pravasan Kendra

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(Source: www.sewaecotourism.org)

Exhibit 3: Pictures of Visitors

