

How we're creating a Social Enterprise

What I believe

I am a strong believer in the idea that tourism can drive positive change – it can bring deeper understanding between different cultures, and provide economic benefits to local communities, especially disadvantaged sections.



But that doesn't happen by magic.

To bring this change, tourism operators like us must actively work towards it. Otherwise, the effects of tourism can often be negative; especially in countries that have a lot of poverty.

Secondly, tour operators like us have to be willing to stick it out in the long term. We must survive financially and we must ensure that our projects are permanent and sustainable. Short term vision leads to start-and-stop projects, which actually makes things worse for local communities.

Our tourism policy is simple and practical: If our tours are responsibly and profitably designed, and our business remains viable in the long run, the benefits we want to deliver to the community will fructify and multiply.

To this end, our sustainable tourism policy endeavours to:

(1) Create a win-win situation for tourists and local communities.

We achieve a win-win by designing innovative high quality experiential tours, which have strong appeal to clients, and at the same time bring benefits to locals. This is not rocket-science; but it needs creativity, and a willingness to experiment.

- Our tours are fun. They are high quality. You don't have to book them because you feel sorry for someone. We don't want any "pity tourism". We want to offer tours that are actually worth every penny you pay for them. This is very important if we want tourists and locals to have a dialog on equal footing.
- Our tours have positive outcomes for locals. In these tours we employ local people, especially those who come from lower income groups and marginalised segments of society. We incorporate components that bring our guests in direct contact with local culture, local development projects, craft and textile workshops, etc. We try to educate guests in a way that demystifies the exotic "Other". Guests interested in shopping also have a chance to purchase products directly from producers or at cooperative stores and fair price shops.



Visitors with student guides in front of Victoria Terminus, Mumbai.



Two of our Mumbai guides

(2) Create a win for us as well

We ensure that our tours make money for us. If we fail to be profitable, we will not be able to continue our efforts in the long run. We have been building long-term relationships with non-profits that we support. This means that in a bad business year, we can't drop out of our commitments or play fast-and-loose with their plans. We hire our employees, and source various products and services in such a way that we maximize benefits to the local community. We cannot do this effectively if we ourselves go out of business

We identify and work on specific socially relevant projects not only through financial contributions, but through mentorship and sustainable livelihood programmes (more about this below). We recognize it is not enough to simply fund projects; some involvement and championing of causes is necessary.

We have been trying to build socially responsible tourism "into the DNA" of the company rather than seeing "corporate social responsibility" as a separate goal to be pursued. There is a special focus on the employment of women, and college-going youth from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. We do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, religion, nationality, age, gender. We make an effort to cater to people with different disabilities.



We have been here since 2006 and have seen these beliefs translate to reality. There's a long road ahead but it is an exciting journey.

What we're doing:

FLAGSHIP PROGRAMMES: "MUMBAI LOCAL" and "DELHI BY METRO"

We have two flagship programmes where we partner with local non-profits in Mumbai and Delhi to periodically recruit students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds as tour guides and then as our office staff.

The aim of this programme is to provide the students with a source of income that helps them graduate while working. This prevents them from having to drop out of education in order to work and supplement the family's economic situation.

We also want to up-skill the students by teaching and honing their computer skills and general knowledge of history, social issues, etc. Along with work experience, they get the confidence and knowledge to face job interviews in future. The skills learnt in our programme give them an edge. The programme runs like this:

Step One: We partner with a local non-profit working with students - in Delhi, with Manzil (<http://manzil.in>) and in Mumbai, with the Akanksha Foundation (<http://www.akanksha.org>). From these non-profits, we interview students of ages 16-20 and select them for our programme.

Step Two: We have designed specific tours in Mumbai (called Mumbai Local) and in Delhi (called Delhi by Metro), for which we train these students to be the guides. The timings of these tours do not interfere with students' college hours. Training is done for about 2-3 months. We provide tour scripts for them to learn, and also conduct practical training. After the training, they join the previous batch of students on actual tours as "shadow" guides and see how the tours work. After the shadow-training, they are then ready to do their own tours.

Step Three: The students work as guides on part-time basis with us. During this period, we encourage them to complete their graduation and get a college degree. Since they are able to earn income from the tours, the pressure to quit education and start working immediately is lessened. They develop a sense of pride in their city, culture and history. As they come into contact with tourists, they develop confidence and communication skills, and become capable of communicating in English with a variety of people and groups.

Step Four: Some guides from the programme then start working as office staff where they are trained in computer skills, communication skills and tourism operations. In Mumbai, we are also in the process of conducting group discussions / teaching sessions on history, social issues, etc. Apart from providing a forum for the articulation and debate of various issues, the students also develop group discussion skills which are useful in future job interviews.

Step Five: Finally we aim that the students should leave the programme, become independent and have full-fledged careers of their own, thus allowing us to recruit the next batch. If they choose a career in tourism, their experience as guides and tour operations gives them a leg up. Some have opted to learn foreign languages and continue as professional guides while others have taken up office jobs in the field of tourism. For example, three of our student guides have gone on a scholarship program to the USA to study Tourism Management. Some of our students have found jobs in various other fields like hotel management, communications, etc. while others are pursuing higher education.



Delhi by Metro student guides holding their scripts. They are being trained by Shilpi, who teaches design in the urban context; Shilpi is a textile designer, a tree-hugger and a proud Dilliwalli and we are delighted that she is our trainer.



Please refer to these blog posts and Facebook photo albums to know more:

- <http://delhimagic.blogspot.in/2011/07/delhi-by-metro-tourgood-things.html>
- <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.392522614144544.90327.128216327241842&type=3>

FINANCIAL AND PROMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR SEVERAL CAUSES/NON-PROFITS

Apart from making upfront monetary contributions to these organizations below we also source products and services from them when feasible.

If the products/services they already have on offer are not conducive to our operations, we collaborate with them to design items that can lead to a sustainable partnership with the NPO (non-profit organization) or NGO (non-governmental organization). When tourists travel with us, we give them a document that educates them about the work of various non-profits that we support. We offer suggestions on how to include visits to these organizations as part of their itineraries, or how they could contribute in other ways. We try to ensure that at least some of the money that tourists spend in India goes to support deserving causes.

List of organizations we support:

We support Goonj in Mumbai and Delhi, which works innovatively in the area of recycling to bring about social change. We collect and deliver clothes and other material as donations for Goonj from our tourists. We actively take our guests to visit the Goonj recycling site for an eye-opening demonstration of the work done there. We blog about and mention Goonj in our facebook page as well.

<http://delhimagic.blogspot.in/2012/08/visiting-goonj-absolute-must-do-in-delhi.html>



Visiting Goonj



Tourists with legendary activist and Magsaysay Award winner Rajendra Singh

In Jaipur, we support [Tarun Bharat Sangh](https://www.facebook.com/jalpurush) (TBS, <https://www.facebook.com/jalpurush>), a local voluntary community-based organization that works towards sustainable agriculture in drought prone areas of Rajasthan by reviving traditional methods of rainwater harvesting.

Rajendra Singh is the founder of Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), which has brought about an amazing transformation in water levels in more than 3000 drought prone villages in Rajasthan. We regularly take interested tourists to visit TBS and share part of our tour earning with TBS.

In Agra, we support the [Wildlife SOS Bear Rescue Center](https://www.facebook.com/wildlifesosindia) by way of small cash donations and recommending visits for guests, especially when they have kids along, to see the work being done to rescue sloth bears and elephants.

(<https://www.facebook.com/wildlifesosindia>)



We support VSSM ([Vicharata Samuday Samarthan Manch](https://www.facebook.com/vssmindia?fref=ts)) with an annual contribution of Rs 100,000. They work to bring justice, equality and prosperity to nomadic tribes of India.

<https://www.facebook.com/vssmindia?fref=ts>

We are looking to design livelihood programs for the women of the nomadic tribes, bringing them in direct contact with tourists through workshops. The workshops aim to provide an avenue for nomadic women to demonstrate and market their traditional handicrafts without middlemen.



Donation of Rs 5000 to [Welfare of Stray Dogs](https://www.facebook.com/thewelfareofstraydogs), Mumbai

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Donation of Rs 120,000 this year to [Dharavi Art Room](https://www.facebook.com/dharaviartroom) (started this year, latest payment is Apr 2014), apart from mentoring the organization (as mentioned below).

<https://www.facebook.com/dharaviartroom>

MENTORSHIP

Mentorship of [Dharavi Art Room](https://www.facebook.com/dharaviartroom), an organization that conducts art and photography workshops for children and women from the Dharavi slum, and also works with government schools in several areas.

The newest project of the Art Room is to have workshops for children in 12 neighbourhoods undergoing forceful change, and paint wall murals in these areas. I am mentoring and guiding them as to how to make their organization sustainable.



Recently I along with several of my staff participated in a publicity, fundraising and sale of products for the Art Room, by volunteering to set up and man a 2-day exhibition stall/shop, for which they had acquired the space

(<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.701102836619852.1073741842.128216327241842&type=3>). I aim eventually to help Art Room to get corporate sponsors, give them design inputs on creating products that can be used as corporate gifts, etc.

Mentorship of [Be The Local](https://www.facebook.com/be-thelocal), a local tourism company owned and operated by students. We have been providing training programmes to their student guides from Dharavi.

LIVELIHOOD PROJECTS

We promote crafts and skills that provide employment to people from lower income groups. We play the role of connecting buyers with sellers, participate in the design of the craft objects, help in sourcing raw material, control the quality of the output, and ensure project management and timely delivery to clients.

So far we have done two projects, both in the design of cotton “jhola” bags. The first project included a contribution to [Sneha](#), it was stitched at the Sneha livelihood centre. The second project was done by a low income family from Dharavi and 10% of the proceeds went to **Dharavi Art Room**.

We are beginning to offer crafts workshops in Ahmedabad in collaboration with VSSM.



OTHER EFFORTS AT ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Our tours incorporate local transport when possible - local trains and buses which greatly reduce the carbon footprint of the traveller.
- Our Food Tours are conducted in the homes of locals, who procure the food in local markets, and the food is typically cooked by the lady of the family.
- We have made conscious efforts to enroll the services of local women whenever possible, as guides and management staff. A job as a tour guide is especially useful for women due to its flexible timings.
- Our tours are designed to allow the tourist to imbibe local culture, by walking through specific culture-rich areas such as market-places, and heritage districts. The idea behind the tours is for the traveller to experience the city the way locals do. We advice tourists on culturally/geographically appropriate attire so that you fit better with the environment. Our intention is to discourage gawking, voyeurism or any disrespectful behaviour; but actively create an immersive, holistic understanding of the culture and society.

In the end, we want that a sense of pride in our culture should be imbibed by our staff and our guests, while at the same time understanding the issues and challenges that face India today.

