



CONTROVERSIAL TOURIST ATTRACTION OF ORIENTAL CULTURES – INDIA

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Abstract:

The paper examines the influence of romanticized western visions of “oriental cultures,” on certain destinations. In this sense, the term “Orientalism” is first defined as a form of exoticism. The focus of the analysis is on controversial aesthetic experiences of travelers, as well as opposed tourist narratives relating to India and the Taj Mahal. India, as the distant Orient, has a long and rich history in the storytelling, myths and legends that spark the imagination of the West, as its irrational and enigmatic antithesis. At the same time, it is a paradigm of escapism, adventure, ecstasy, high spirituality, and oneiric travel. Therefore, in tourism promotion, India is often presented as an “absolutely different universe” that “shakes the soul” of visitors, in which “no one will remain indifferent” and where tourists will experience “a radical transformation of their own personality”.

Keywords:

exoticism, mythology, aesthetics, destination, storytelling

INTRODUCTION - ORIENTALISM AS A FORM OF EXOTICISM

The need of tourists for a full inversion (upside-down life) or absolute diversity is most often associated with the notion of exoticism understood precisely as the aesthetics of different (new, unusual, strange). Segalen (cf. Todorov 1994, 70-74) points out that for him exotic is what is different from him, everything that is other, getting to know something that we ourselves are not. Diversity must be appreciated, because it is the only thing that provides the intensity of sensations, and to sense means to live. Those who know how to practice exoticism, i.e. to enjoy the differences between themselves and the object of their perception, may be called exoticists. Those are people who feel all the charm of the different, people who can never get enough of travel. The experience of the exotic is only possible if we are somewhat separated from the object of enjoyment. However, the author warns that we first have to merge with all the other that is in front of us, and then to extract ourselves from it in order to feel all its flavor of the objective.

The notion of “oriental,” according to Schwab (1950), denotes amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asian, which is in a wonderful way synonymous with the exotic, mysterious, deep and

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primordial. Orientalism, according to Said (2000:9-18), is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction being drawn between “the Orient” and (most often) “the Occident,” or the East and the West. He points out that there is a long tradition of the so-called Orientalism, the understanding of the Orient that is based on a special place of the Orient in the Western European experience. The Orient is not only a neighbor of Europe, it is also the place of the largest, richest and oldest European colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its rival in the culture and one of its deepest and most common images of the Other. Besides, the Orient has helped in defining Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. European culture has invigorated its strength and identity by profiling itself opposite to the Orient as its surrogate or even its hidden Self. The relationship between the Orient and the Occident is a relationship of power, domination, varying degrees of complex hegemony. At the same time, the evolution of the relationship of the West towards the Other is occurring. This means that the image of the Other is primarily viewed through the prism of exoticism. In addition, the Orient - as a kind of incarnation of exoticism, simultaneously attracts and repels, while disturbing otherness feeds exoticism and exaltation, but also devalues the Other due to ignorance. Here, stereotypes are also being accumulated, and the openness provided by tourism produces “Occidentalization,” which is seen as a form of impoverishment.

CONTROVERSIAL ORIENTAL EXOTICISM OF INDIA

India has a long history in the imagination of the West. As an exotic, sensual destination, as a paradigm of adventure, numerous stories have been narrated about it (Salmon, 2010). Romantic images, which, over the centuries, the West projected to India have led to it gaining a very specific identity as part of the Far Orient. This myth is dominated by the idea that India has elusive, spiritual and strange magic features, which are impossible to understand by analytical methods and a rational approach. Most travelers attempt to discover the essence of this enigmatic country, and some returned from it, claiming that they “knew it well.” For the exoticism of the late nineteenth century, according to Todorov (1994), India was “elsewhere” in the true meaning of the word. European literature of the twentieth century views India through exoticism that means escape, desire for ecstasy and an oniric journey. It is, in fact, an idea of the East as the opposite of the colonial and primordially tired West. Therefore, the dominant feature that stems from the experience of travelers is that India is a country of an alternative system of values in relation to Europe, as well as the fascinating contradictions (from oriental luxury and wealth to extreme poverty and diseases). In addition, two conflicting approaches to understanding India have been developed. According to the first, India is passive and spiritual, and according to the second, it is based on chaos and irrational violence. At first glance, these different discourses are in dramatic contrast. However, regardless of whether they celebrate or lament the mentioned characteristics of India, the travelers usually make a clear distinction between the organic India and the cultural West. Bearing in mind this image, tour operators often promote India as a unique experience, which will radically change tourists’ lives. Upon their return, they will have a completely different consciousness, will transform themselves and their own view of the world. It is represented as a unique experience and a shock for all the senses. The romantic notion of India is a powerful means of country branding and tourism promotion. Travel guides, through photos and text (specific discourse), influence tourists in India, who simultaneously become producers and consumers of authenticity and diversity. Despite internal differences, the majority of tourists have utopian expectations of Indian temples, cities and rural areas, which play an important role in building their travel identities. They usually borrow their utopian visions from the hegemonic, colonial, western mythology (but attribute to them new meanings related to the modern utopia of a new social and moral order). Such narratives and popular myths compose the “cultural baggage” of modern India visitors. The popularity of India as a tourist destination reflects the way in which it is historically framed in the tourist literature, cinematography, photography, literary texts, as a very specific symbolic and romantic place. The notion of the Indian “otherness” is the prototype of a transgressive identification that can be realized through physical activities that affect the transformation of personality and intercultural (mis)understanding.

When it comes to mass tourists, India is among the countries that cause contradictory and extremely opposed views in cyber space. This means that there is positive storytelling by Western popular culture that idealizes India, as well as negative storytelling that demonizes it. Thanks to the global availability of posting



and reading comments of travelers (blogs) on the Internet, it is possible to follow simultaneously different experiences of India, positive and negative storytelling, arguments and counter-arguments of lovers and haters of India. With this in mind, here we will present a concise compilation of the most frequent positive and negative comments posted on some websites and blogs, which now influence public opinion and the global image of a particular destination more than classical media and literature.

Positive digital storytelling

- ♦ India is one of the most interesting, beautiful and picturesque countries in the world. No country is more diverse and unique than India, nowhere in the world there is a country like India.
- ♦ Traveling across India is an attack on all the senses that will change your life for the better, will allow you to set things in a broader context and appreciate more and love your own country.
- ♦ Diverse and rich flora and fauna and animals are everywhere (goats, cows, dogs, monkeys).
- ♦ People in India love to communicate with foreigners and invite them to their house, and occasionally a foreigner feels like a celebrity here. The Hindus are family people, honest, noble, proud, affectionate, spiritual, warm and friendly to tourists.
- ♦ Low prices. India is one of the cheapest countries to travel to (accommodation, food and transport cost 25 to 20 dollars a day).
- ♦ Food in India is very delicious, rich, diverse and seasoned.
- ♦ Religion and high spiritualism (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam), spiritual immersion (Gang and Varanasi, Utter Pradesh).
- ♦ Architectural masterpieces, magnificent forts, palaces, temples, mosques and mausoleums, archaeological remains (the Khajuraho Group of Monuments, Jaipur - Rajasthan), the Taj Mahal is one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, a symbol of love that transcends death.
- ♦ Beaches (Aconda, Palolem, Goa - the capital of parties),
- ♦ Chaos and urban madness of large cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta (traffic jams, crowded streets, horns honking, noise, exhaust fumes, animals that walk freely),
- ♦ Adventure (sense of adventure is everywhere, while walking the streets, traveling by bus or hiking the Himalayas),
- ♦ Festivals (Krishna's birth, Rama's return, the festival of colors),
- ♦ Ellora Caves and Ajanta Caves,
- ♦ Long and exciting journeys by rail,
- ♦ Possibility of overnight stays in luxurious palaces of Maharajas transformed into hotels (Chandran, s.a.; Cook, 2017; Patrick, 2018; Sharma, 2017; The Telegraph, 2018; Ward, 2017).

Negative digital storytelling

- ♦ Frequent sexual attacks on women, including group rapes of female tourists.
- ♦ It is not clear where all the money earned from tourism is going to.
- ♦ The price-quality ratio is far from the best.
- ♦ A journey through India is stressful and very tiring due to large crowds and curiosity about foreigners. It is hard to move or even walk in India. Problems and long waits when purchasing tickets and making reservations, overcrowded trains and buses, and sharing a seat with the locals, long delays.
- ♦ Low sanitation and hygiene standards. Dirty toilets without toilet paper, people and animals defecate wherever they can, the water is polluted, so only bottled water should be consumed, and all foreigners get stomachaches accompanied by diarrhea sooner or later.
- ♦ It is hard to find food you like. Those who do not like Indian food are unlikely to find another type of food or international cuisine (a particular problem is unhygienic food storage and preparation).



- ♦ Most people attempt to trick tourists and charge much higher prices; they lie very much everywhere (there are many rogues; taxi drivers and tuktuk drivers rob tourists).
- ♦ There are many poor people (70% of the population survives on less than two dollars a day), so, on the streets, there are many beggars and invalids who are constantly before your eyes and aggressively ask for money.
- ♦ Pollution. No country is so as polluted as India. There are piles of garbage everywhere. The only way to destroy the garbage is to burn it, so the stench of burning garbage can be sensed everywhere. In the streets of cities, even the largest ones, there is much dirt and feces of animals that are on the loose. The residents are throwing trash massively while walking or in front of their houses, and waste is not collected, is not taken to landfills or recycled, but is thrown into rivers, from which drinking water is being pumped.
- ♦ It is difficult to encounter other tourists, because in India there are not many places (hostels, restaurants) where foreigners can meet and share experiences,
- ♦ People do not leave you alone even for a moment and even take pictures of you with their phones, which is very irritating and rude.
- ♦ Corruption is widespread, from top to bottom of the social scale (50% of the people have to bribe someone to get a job in the civil service), as well as the arbitrary application of the law.
- ♦ You cannot escape from all that, you cannot avoid dirt, poverty, pollution, as well as heat or moisture (Kaspars, 2016; Ragusa, 2015; Shine, 2016; Whitmarsh, 2014; Wilson, 2016; Sabrina, 2017; Stewart, 2014).

The listed travel storytelling of India, at first glance, may be categorized as “commonplace,” which can be applied to many other poor countries. Contrasts between the rich and the poor exist almost everywhere, even in developed countries. However, here it is extreme poverty (leprotic beggars who sleep on the streets), on the one hand, and extreme wealth on the other hand (luxurious palaces of maharajas or villas of politicians and Bollywood stars). Such contrasts certainly cannot be seen in Europe, especially not in Scandinavia or Switzerland, which is culture shock for tourists from these countries. However, despite the fact that, in India, beauty and ugliness, destitution and grandeur are greater than anywhere else, which increases the depth of contrast, it is equally important that both extremes at the same time have a pronounced “exotic aura,” i.e. both destitution and grandeur are different and more exotic than in the West.

The preoccupation of tourists with oriental exoticism is based on the desire to be immersed into the Indian “diversity,” and expose the soul and the body to poverty, diseases and deformities, which can lead to increased sensory perception that transcends the boundaries established in Western societies. This popular view has its place in the context of the mythology of India as a special, symbolic place that is “beyond the boundaries” of the West, which opens the door to new forms of underground identity. Tourists search for completely different experiences, in part because they are influenced by the romantic notion of India as a place of radical “otherness,” which has created a series of socially constructed stereotypes. Certainly, there are objective material, social, aesthetic, sensual and symbolic differences between Indian and Western conceptions of urban and rural areas, which is the main reason why they are appealing to tourists. Indian urban landscape is something radically different, has a Dionysian character, is domineered by the carnival spirit, disorder and chaos that fascinate tourists. It is multisensual and complex, i.e. represents sensuality, indulgence and giddiness. It inclines towards transgression and disorder, is ruled by the game principles of mimicry and ilinx, which Caillois (1979) opposed to the pair agon - alea, which is dominant in the Western society. An unusual and spectacular mise en scène, a magical Dionysian area of the Orient encourages the exotic fantasy of time travel - into the past. However, tourists are aware of the fact that they are only temporary intruders who do not fit into the local iconography, and that their expectations of exotic experiences are a commercial product of the postmodern form of nostalgia, as a form of hedonistic experience.

CONCLUSION

The key question to ask in the end is whether exoticism is in danger, especially Oriental exoticism. In fact, given the accelerated process of globalization and expansion of international tourism, there is the increasingly faster occidentalization of the Orient and the rest of the world, reducing differences (otherness), and therefore tourist attraction. However, as the process of globalization is becoming increasingly two-way in



nature, it means that there is the reverse orientalizing of the West, where significant contribution is given by massive waves of refugees from war zones, economic immigrants, as well as mass tourists (a growing share of Chinese tourists in international tourism, for whom the West is an “exotic destination”). The roles and concepts are, therefore, rapidly changing, so the boundaries between the antagonistic categories the West - the East are increasingly being blurred or even erased, at least when it comes to culture, under the influence of homogenizing and hybridizing effects of globalization. With this in mind, the Orient is no longer the only or main exotic destination, now some other parts of the world (Africa, South America, the Arctic and Antarctic) appear as new exotic places that are equally exotic to tourists from the West (Europe, the USA) and the East (China, Japan). Finally, in this context, the question of relativity of the value assessment of certain categories and phenomena that characterize a particular destination is raised. Thus, for example, tourists who love Indian food place it in the category of positive aspects of the local culture, while those who do not like it place it in the negative category. It is similar to the phenomenon of “chaos” in Indian cities and in the streets, for some it is extremely irritating and repulsive, while for others, it is a desirable part of the overall atmosphere and exotic adventure. Finally, while for some the desire of local residents to communicate with foreigners is irritating and burdensome, for others it is a source of satisfaction because they are able to communicate with a radically different other, which satisfies their need for interpersonal exoticism. Given the above, it is clear that the analysis of exoticism, orientalism, intercultural communication, and (dis)agreements, in addition to cultural differences, must include both group and individual differences in value systems, needs, desires and expectations of tourists, on the one hand, and the local population, on the other hand.

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