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The perennial Western tourism representations of India that refuse to die

Abstract

Western media represents Third World destinations and communities as stagnant and primitive. Scholars have argued that these representations are fundamentally related to the practices of colonization. Except for a few valuable exceptions research on tourism representations of the Third World is scarce. In tourism research, previous investigations have been mainly limited to analyses of visual images and texts of tourist brochures, newspaper articles, postcards and travel magazines. However, researchers have paid little attention to conduct a historical study of Western tourism representations of the Third World taking a larger sample of data. Thus, this study explored if there is any difference between the way India and Indians are represented in the nineteenth century Western travel writing, and contemporary Western travel writing. The results revealed that much like in the nineteenth century, contemporary Western travel writing also emphasizes the romantic image of India and Indians – timeless, poverty-stricken, exotic women and effeminate men. Therefore, it can be argued that colonialism is still pervasive in contemporary Western tourism representations.

Introduction

"Colonialism is not best understood primarily as a political or economic relationship that is legitimized or justified through ideologies of racism or progress. Rather, colonialism has always, equally importantly and deeply, been a cultural process; its discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives" (Thomas, 1994, p. 2)

Previous research has emphasized that Western travel writing represents Third World destinations and communities as unspoiled, mystical, and stagnant (Britton, 1979; Cohen, 1993; Hutt, 1996). Adding to Said's (1978) seminal work *Orientalism*, recently, authors (Bandyopadhyay, & Morais, 2005; Echtner, & Prasad, 2003) have criticized

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these Western touristic representations, and have argued that these representations are embedded with a colonial discourse. As Said (1978, pp. 308-309) claimed:

> *The Oriental is given as fixed, stable, in need of investigation, in need even of knowledge about himself. No dialectic is either desired or allowed. There is a source of information (the Oriental) and a source of knowledge (the Orientalist). In short, a writer and a subject matter otherwise inert.*

Another author who vehemently criticized hegemonic Western representations of the Third World is Mary Louise Pratt. In her seminal work *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt (1992) argued that travel writing is inherently associated to the practices of colonization. In travel writing, these "texts are often assumed to express a shared European mentality, the sentiments of a unified, conquering elite" (Stoler, 1989, cited in Thomas, 1994, p. 13). Pratt (1992, p. 4) calls it "*contact zones*, social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination." As Blanton (2002, p. 2) mentioned, "from Marco Polo to Bruce Chatwin, travelers' tales about distant places and exotic cultures have proven to be remarkably popular reading [as] travel narrative is a compelling and seductive form of story-telling." Thus, it can be argued, tourism representations have traditionally been implicated in socio-political discourses (Bhabha, 1983; Foucault, 1984; Hollinshead, 1993; Pratt, 1992; Said 1978).

Western representations of India as practices of colonization

Western representations of India are embedded with a colonial prism (Said, 1978) with images of primitiveness and exoticism. One of the major sources of these colonial representations of India is through travel writings, which started from an earlier time. However, with the advent of the East India Company (EIC) in India, the period 1600-1750 is known as the British exploration in India (Nayar, 2005). At this time, the British were not directly involved in the politics of the Indian subcontinent. From the 1750s, however, trading interests began to give way for territorial expansion. The British first established a footing in the Indian subcontinent when British soldiers led by Robert Clive defeated Nawab Siraj Ud Daulah at the Battle of Plassey in Bengal in 1757. After that, the East India Company transformed itself from a purely commercial company into a military power. Post-Plassey (1757), colonialist writings on India, and "descriptions of wonder and excess are a remarkable feature of travelogues right up to the middle of the eighteenth century" (Nayar, 2005, p. 214). However, in Teltscher's (1995, p. 191) opinion, until the mid-eighteenth century, it was more of a European rather than an English tradition of writing about India, "when Europeans gleaned most of their information on India from missionary letters, notably the thirty-four-volume Jesuit *Lettres edifiantes et curieuses* (1702-76)." British tradition of writing about India particularly emerged by the mid-eighteenth century, and early nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in the number of British travelers writing about India. As Arnold (2006, p. 26) mentioned,

> *… the early nineteenth century saw the publication in Britain of hundreds, if not thousands, of books about India: histories, biographies, political commentaries, economic*

analyses, evangelical tracts, chronicles of military campaigns, and tales of sport and hunting, and, above all, travel arratives." But the frequent invocation of "prospects," "spectacles," and "coups d'oeil" – standard expressions in the travel literature and itinerant science of this period – also suggests a kind of panopticism exercised through the critical gaze of the European observer.

Figure 1
**TRAVEL WRITING DURING THE COLONIAL TIMES**

While commenting on British (and European) travel writing about India in the nineteenth century, Lalvani (1995, p. 263) argued, "the discourse of '*le femme orientale*' which informed the Romantic critique of capitalism, was recuperated in a hegemonic manner to promote a commodity fetish and an expanding consumer culture, the success of this transference was guaranteed by Romanticism, which not only underwrote the discourse of *Orientalism* but ironically advanced a psychology commensurate with the emergence of a consumer society." Adding to the comments of Arnold (2006), Nayar (2007), Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001), Lalvani (1995), the exploration of nineteenth-century travel writings on India made it apparent how important Romantic gaze was at that period, which on one hand, provided the travelers self-discovery, while on the other hand, was an integral part of the European colonial scientific enterprise and "execute a colonial ideology of improvement" (Nayar, 2002, 2005). As Ludden (1996, p. 9) claimed:

European imperialism thus invented the religious traditionalism that formed its ideological other in the orient, and this made imperialism appear ideologically as the equivalent of modernization and progress. As a result we can read in history books that Europeans brought modernity to an East that was steeped in religious tradition.

Another famous author writing about India is Rudyard Kipling. Kipling has twisted the image of India and Indians in the Western World as the "faceless, the *lesser breed* [who are] the *white man's burden*" (Isaacs, 1958). Harold Isaacs (1958) conducted a study, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* to explore how Americans regarded Chinese and Indians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Isaacs mentioned that for his study, out of 181 Americans he interviewed, 69 spontaneously mentioned Kipling as a source of impressions relating to India, and the image that all interviewees had about India in common was of "remoteness, of the exotic, the bizarre, the strange and unfamiliar." It has been almost fifty years since Isaacs (1958) wrote the book, but even now, these images about India are still widely and strongly promoted. Thus, it can be argued, these stereotypes are an intrinsic part of Western culture passing on inaccurate images of India and Indians from one generation to another.

Figure 2
CONTEMPORARY WESTERN TRAVEL WRITING
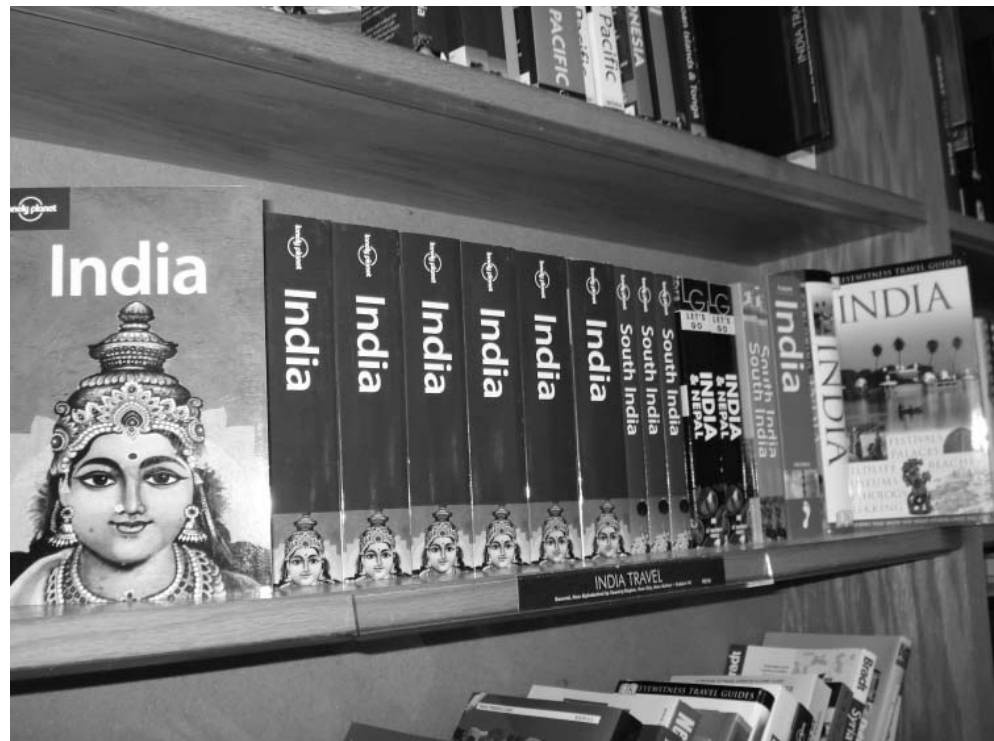
Riggins (2004) opined that in the nineteenth century readers expected exotic and bizarre travel stories, which still exists in the Western world. Also, Simmons (2004) claimed, colonialism still exists in Western travel writing. Except for a few valuable exceptions (e.g., Bandyopadhyay, & Morais, 2005; Britton, 1979; Echtner, & Prasad, 2003; Silver, 1993; Tavares, & Brosseau, 2006), research on tourism representations of the Third World is scarce. In tourism research, previous investigations on representations of the Third World have been mainly limited to analyses of visual images and texts of tourist brochures, newspaper articles, postcards and travel magazines. However,

researchers have paid little attention to conduct a historical study of Western tourism representations of the Third World taking a larger sample of data. Therefore, to attend to this significant lacuna in tourism research, this study critically construed if there is any difference between the way India and Indians are represented in the nineteenth century Western (especially British) tourism representations and contemporary Western tourism representations. Is colonialism still pervasive through tourism? Thus, the following research questions guided this study: how was India and Indians represented in the nineteenth century Western (especially British) travel writings, how are India and Indians represented in the contemporary Western travel writings, and is there any difference between the two representations of India and Indians?

Methods

The textual representations of India and Indians in the travel writings by the Europeans, especially the British in the nineteenth century are explored. During the colonial era, there was a European tradition of writing about India, and "travel accounts were frequently translated into several European languages and gathered into collections of voyages" (Teltscher, 1995, p. 3). Data was collected from three books written by British authors during the nineteenth century. They are: *Bits about India* by H. H. Holcomb (1888), *India and its People* by Rev. Hollis Read (1858), and *The Oriental and its People* by J. L. Hauser (1876). Nineteenth century was considered for the data collection as nineteenth century is regarded as the richest period of travel writing (Blanton, 2002).

To find out how India and Indians are represented in the contemporary Western travel writings, various sources were examined within a ten year timeframe from 1993 to 2003. India experienced a considerable increase of international tourists since the country's economic liberalization in 1991. Brochures were considered as a source of information, as they are a standard communication tool within the tourism industry (Getz, & Sailor, 1993; Jenkins, 2003). According to Selwyn (1996, p. 16) brochures are "multifaceted texts which challenge several conventional assumptions about the nature of postmodern culture." Many researchers have used brochures to investigate the texts and images projected of particular destinations (Chon, 1991; Crompton, 1979; Dilley, 1986; Hopkins, 1998; Morgan, & Pritchard, 1995, 1996; Wicks, & Schutt, 1991). In addition, travel writing on India was collected from leading magazines and newspapers in the United States such as *Leisure + Travel, National Geographic Traveler, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times.*

Content analysis was used in this study. Several scholars have used content analysis to investigate texts and images in tourism guidebooks, magazine articles and brochures (Buck, 1977; Dilley, 1986; Hopkins, 1998; Jenkins, 2003; Moeran, 1983; Thurot, & Thurot, 1983; Uzzell, 1984). To put it simply, in the words of Henderson (1991), content analysis allows researchers to systematically analyze some aspect that appears in written form.

Results and discussion

An examination of the representations of India and Indians in the nineteenth century Western travel writings and contemporary Western travel writings revealed four predominant themes: 1) Timeless India, 2) Poverty, 3) Exotic women, and 4) Effeminate men.

TIMELESS INDIA

The most prominent theme from the investigation of the nineteenth century Western travel writing was the description of India as timeless. For example, the following descriptions best illustrates how Western travel writers portrayed India as timeless:

An oriental knows nothing of the value of time, and idly waits weeks, and even months, for the grain in the fields to mature or the fruit on the trees to ripen, taking little more note of time than do the birds singing in the branches above him. A servant, when sent on an errand, will not mind waiting a whole day for an answer, provided he can find near at hand a bazaar where he may purchase a few handfuls of parched grain with which to satisfy his hunger (Holcomb, 1888, p. 45).

…the train glides out of the station, and leaves staring after it with astonished eyes hapless creatures who will sit demurely upon the platform until the coming of another train. They do not make much ado, these patient mortals. 'It is our fate,' they sigh; and, consoling themselves with the hookah and satisfying their hunger with a few handfuls of parched grain, they quietly wait (Holcomb, 1888, p 13).

Authors have provided justification of this representation of India as timeless during the colonial period. For example, Katherine Mayo (1927) wrote a book "Mother India" which

… was written in the context of official and unofficial British efforts to generate support in America for British rule in India. It added contemporary and lurid detail to the image of Hindu India as irredeemably and hopelessly impoverished, degraded, depraved, and corrupt (Rudolph, 1990, p. 166 cited in Sen, 2005, p. 150)

An investigation of contemporary travel writing revealed that India is still portrayed as timeless. For example, there were numerous descriptions which portrayed Indian society as stagnant. This notion is well illustrated in the following description: "narrow streets give this captivating town an almost medieval feel" (Intrepid Traveler, 2003). One author in the Conde Nast Traveler mentioned: "India's delirium over the new leaves me mildly dejected. I want it to stay, as it was when I first visited 20 years ago. It's cheaper that way, and less like home" (Weiss, 2001).

Obviously, what can provide Western tourists for their "mythical Utopias" than India? All these descriptions of India and Indians support Shafi's (1997: 42) opinion that "… these voyages were mostly exercises in nostalgia, celebrating India as the last refuge of spirituality in the modern, technologically dominated world."

POVERTY

The second most prominent theme was the description of poverty in India. For example, descriptions of incredible misery formed the central part of all travel writers accounts:

> *Curry and rice are luxuries they dare not think of. Plain boiled rice is not so expensive, and of that they sometimes do manage to have a treat, about two mouthsful each. Bread or biscuits, or 'chuppatees' (cakes made of rice flour), are quite out of the question. Butter-milk with a green chili after it, and now and then a bit of salt fish by way of a relish, is generally their sole food; and parched peas or raw 'chenna' (or grain), forms a kind of variety which they chew, resembling the cud of bitter poverty in every sense of the word* (Hervey, 1833, cited in Kaul, 1979, p. 183).

> *Collections of mud huts or else adobe brick structures smeared with a smooth mixture of dung and clay, they had walls seven to eight feet high. Rarely did they have windows. The roof consisted of a thatch of straw and palm leaves laid over poles. In size, most houses were scarcely any larger than a ten by twelve feet rectangle with doors around four feet wide. The equipment of the household was just as simple as the building itself. In larger houses, matting screens were used to protect the women from the gaze of other men in the of the women* (Hauser, 1876).

There were several descriptions in the brochures emphasizing the poverty in India. For example, there was a mention: "*fascinating faces of India*" (Fallows, 2003) describing images of poor people who paint their faces differently everyday to earn a livelihood. Another picture illustrating a Western female sitting on a bullock-cart with several poor children and a mud house at the backdrop had the following caption: "*your chariot awaits*" (Kindness, 2003). One author in the *National Geographic Traveler* magazine described India's poverty:

> *Roughly half of all Bombayites live in city slums... [and]... a movable shack made from discarded bits of tarpaulin, tin, and cardboard, which he shares with his wife and five children... [and]... squeezing past clusters of naked children and stary dogs, I peered into improbably small houses where families of 12 or more lodged* (McCarry, 1995).

Several scholars have mentioned that the Western media emphasizes and exaggerates the poverty of India. These Western representations of India have frequently catalogued stories on poverty thus, reinforcing the conception that India "is, was, and *must always be* poor, or to recast [India] as a land of market desirability deserving of a lustful Western gaze" (Bhagavan, & Bari, 2002, p. 99). In a similar vein, Hutnyk (1996) criticized the Western politics through which the Indian city Calcutta is portrayed as a "dystopic site of garbage and poverty."

EXOTIC WOMEN

In the description of Indian women, two themes were prominent. First, the helpless Indian women who needs the support of powerful imperial male. Second, the portrayal

of Indian women as erotic. Indian women were described as helpless who needed the support of powerful imperial male.

> *Poor little child-wife! Thrust out of her home and away from the mother-love that has been around her from her infancy – thrust out into a world of which she has had hardly a glimpse – is she not to be pitied?* (Holcomb, 1888, p. 182).

> *My wife is sickly, and unable to discharge the duties of a wife." You have no right to cast her off on that account, but ought rather to support, cherish, and comfort her, and to treat her, in every respect, as kindly, and as conjugally, as if she were vigorous and healthy. "What you say, Sahib, is good; but my wife is very ill, she can do nothing – she is no wife to me." But you have no right to neglect her and take another, said I* (Read, 1858, pp. 356-357).

Several scholars have commented that one of the principal functions of British travel writing about India was self-justification of their colonial rule. And to achieve that, powerless colonized women needed to be represented as an oppressed group who looked towards male colonial protection from exploitation. As Spivak (1995, p. 24) opined, "white men saving brown women from brown men." Thus, in the Western travel writings during the colonial era, the colonizers were portrayed not as the oppressors but as the liberators of Indians, mainly weak Indian women.

Also, in the descriptions of Indian women, there was a dangerous eroticism about India as a place as there were obscene sculptures on Hindu temples. The powerful colonial discourse portrayed an image of the Indian women as alluring and dangerous to the Western male mind (Bhabha, 1983, p. 29). Below mentioned quotes describes this eroticism of Indian women:

> *"Straight as lances , graceful, majestic, their bodies composed of sweeping curves and straight backs, so marvelous and beautiful to watch that western women might well envy them* (Ralph, 1898).

> *Their queenly walk was worthy of being copied and was certainly more attractive to view than the "dragon stride" of the English girl, or the "... usual amble of her Yankee cousin"* (Nation, 1876).

> *Many rich men engage a number of prostitutes to dance and sing before the idol. Their songs are exceedingly obscene, and their dances very indecent. The clothes of these women are so thin that they are almost the same as naked; the hair of some is thrown loose, hanging down to the waist; they are almost covered with ornaments. While these dances are going forward, the doors are shut to keep out the crowd. Europeans are carefully excluded… [and] … "It makes me blush even to allude to such obscenities; and the shame they occasion restrains me from entering into an enlarged detail of the fables relating to the divinities of India, which are replete with allusions equally abhorrent to modesty and reason* (Read, 1858, pp. 312-313).

In contemporary Western representations, Indian women were predominantly described wearing traditional clothes: "*veiled 'sarees' and 'odhnis'*" (Vaill, 1999, p. 179). One description of two women in traditional clothes mentioned: "*dressed in their finest costumes, Kerala women prepare for a traditional dance performance*" (Cannon, 2001, p. 86). Also, women were described wearing heavy jewelry (nose rings, ear rings, forehead ornament, bangles, necklace) and having ethnic body art (Mehndi). These findings "substantiate previous literature asserting that tourism representations emphasize the natural, mystical and raw qualities of the non-Western Other's sexuality" (Parameswaran, 2002, p. 298).

EFFEMINATE MEN

Another prominent theme was the description of Indian men as effeminate. Western representations repeatedly emphasized how effeminate Indian men were. This theme is best described in the following quotes:

> *They were so effeminate in appearance, that it was difficult to distinguish between men and women. Amiable and intelligent, they nevertheless lacked the 'masculine attributes of mind as they are deficient in the characteristics of physical manhood.' Their long black hair was 'done up' in combs, a custom said to have been introduced by Dutch ladies who insisted that if their servants would wear long hair, they should also wear combs* (Hopkins, 1898).

> *Cross between an orang-outang and a bootjack than a part of the great human family, uncouth, ungainly, un-intellectual, and uncovered… [and]… The men wore their hair very long and adorned with peacocks' feathers; their sole garment consisted of a languti and this combination of dress and hair embellishment gave them an effeminate 'look'* (Nation, 1876).

In India, during the British Raj, colonial stereotypes emphasized the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' men (Sinha, 1995, p. 1). Sinha (1995, pp. 18-19) argued that by creating the effeminate stereotype of Indian men the British colonizers justified Indian men as sexually insatiable and representing them inferior to the imperial male. Contemporary travel writings examined in this study described Indian men with colorful traditional clothes, and *sadhus* sitting idle with long beards and turbans - "*Holy men of India*" (Intrepid Traveler). Further, there were several descriptions of Indian men as servile and pre-modern, who climb trees, walks with elephants, sell flowers, massages Western tourists, and snake charmers. For example, there was a description of a snake charmer in the *National Geographic Traveler* magazine: "The exotic site of these mystical men enticing snakes to dance to the soulful music of gourd flutes has long captured the imagination of people in the West" (Bagla, 2002, p. 1).

Thus, it can be argued that Western hegemonic tourism representations associate Indian men with mysticism which is in stark contrast to Western men's masculinity. Rotter (2001) claimed that maintaining the tradition of Kipling, Americans often depicted Indian men as *homes manques*, and according to Isaacs' (1958) American interviewees:

"effete, soft, weak, unresilient, timid, and effeminate." This supports Stuart Hall (1992, p. 297), who argued, "it was in the process of comparison between the virtues of Englishness and the negative features of other cultures that many of the distinctive characterizations of English identities were first defined."

Conclusion

This historical study provided a critical analysis of Western representations of India and Indians taking a larger sample (i.e., nineteenth century Western travel writings and contemporary Western travel writings). The results revealed that much like previous eras of colonial exploitation, colonialism is still pervasive in contemporary Western travel writings. During colonial times, representations in the context of imperialism justified the scientific objective of ethnography (Spurr, 1993), whereas, in contemporary travel writings, representations of the savages rekindle "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo, 1989). In doing so, Western tourism discourse re-emphasize the Western superiority.

Scholars have well documented how during the colonial times, travel writers narrated myths and fantasies that shaped the European social constructions of India and Indians. Travel writers are still influenced by the "literary traditions and genres" (Simmons, 2004) that shape their status as writers, and, as a result, the "discursive construction of particular races and places" (Gruffudd, Herbert, & Piccini, 2000; McMillin, 1999; Wheeler, 1999, cited in Tavares, & Brosseau, 2006, p. 301) in describing the "Other" still dominates in contemporary Western travel writing. Thus, all these representations of India as stagnant and Indians as irrational denied the scientific development in the country.

Although this study found out similarities between travel writing during colonial times and contemporary travel writing in representing the "Other," however, it did not explore how the information sources for tourists have changed over the past decade, mainly due to the Information Technology (IT) revolution. Print media is no longer the only source of tourists' knowledge of a destination as videos, podcasts, and blogs have become increasingly popular to enhance tourism experiences. This emergence of new technologies using multimedia features has stimulated wanderlust by the availability of experiential information from blogs and videos posted online. Thus, future studies can investigate how India is represented by the digital media to unravel whether the information technology revolution now has replaced the stereotyped images and demystified India.

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