

RAW AND REAL: HOW TRAVEL INFLUENCERS
PACKAGE THE NATION

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This paper delineates how Indian travel influencers construct and morph the tourist gaze of the domestic viewer. The author argues that through Instagram reels, YouTube shorts and vlogs, domestic travel Social Media Influencers (SMIs) propagate a skewed understanding of the nation—one that necessarily (a) claims to offer a glimpse of unseen and authentic India that exists outside of where the viewer resides; (b) can be discovered only in remote, interior parts of the country such as towns/villages or larger neglected, peripheral regions such as the North-East; (c) consists of people who are uni-dimensionally kind, generous and happy—living in peace and harmony with no conflict. Anything that does not fit this paradigm is edited out and not presented to the viewers. Thereby these SMIs articulate an imaginative geography of the nation that not only echoes their ideology but frequently melds to become a constitutive component of the very spaces they imagine.

Introduction

With increasing digitisation and internet penetration, social media platforms have refashioned tremendous aspects of tourism. Travel influencers now play a burgeoning role in shaping viewer's travel aspiration and destination choices. They share their favorite trips, go-to destinations, and travel strategies on social media to prod viewers to embark on similar journeys.

India boasts a booming industry of travel influencers, with creators catering to both domestic and international audiences. Some popular names include Dimpi Sanghvi (3.7m followers), Shasank Sanghvi (2.4m followers) and MonkeyMagic (1.7m followers). They monetize this venture through collaboration with travel agencies, tour operators and local businesses to endorse their brand and packages. This includes brand sponsorship and affiliate marketing of goods such as travel accessories (backpack, sports gear) and/or equipment for documentation (drones, cameras etc). Some even offer their own merchandise and paid travel courses (plan your trip better or document your journey like a professional).

Drawing from Foucault, the tourist gaze of these SMIs reflect “an asymmetrical relationship of power in which they occupy a position of authority and control over the subject of their penetrating gaze”[2]. The category of SMIs (and the tourists they eventually draw), are vastly more privileged than the gazed, especially more-so in rural locations. They possess both economic capital (cash to rent cars and pay for certain kinds of accommodation) and cultural capital (technical know-how of using professional cameras for high-quality documentation).

Enabling quick, free circulation of high-resolution spatial representations of travel destinations, these travel influencers inculcate novel forms of socially-influenced ways of seeing. This paper focuses on domestic Indian creators looking at domestic destinations for domestic audiences. Honing on Instagram and Youtube, this paper dissects tourism-centered representations sociologically, by dually scrutinizing what they encompass and what they leave out.

Deconstructing the Tourist Gaze

A growing sect of Indian travel SMIs promise to satisfy their viewer's desire for authenticity by offering experiences of real travelers rather than of mere



**I Travelled India 🇮🇳 for 100 Days
straight | 100 Days of Dreaming...**

926K views • 5 months ago

Figure 22.0.1: Articulation of a post-modern traveller rather than a tourist. MonkeyMagic’s channel catapulted into success after his mini-vlog series featuring his solo backpack journey across India

tourists. However in his seminal piece of work *Tourist Gaze*, sociologist John Urry argues that there are no authentic travelers [6]. Tourism as an industry of difference operates on the principle that tourists temporarily seek pursuits outside the realm of regulated work in new environments for leisure purposes. Once in these novel settings, their gaze is directed towards distinct landscapes or exotic spectacles that contrast with quotidian experiences.

This gaze, however, is far from neutral. For a region to be tourist-worthy, it needs to be constituted as worth-visiting. This authorisation is done by travel professionals who play an active role in constructing the tourist gaze.

They do so through a collection of signs, which serve as cues for tourists to direct their attention towards particular landscapes or exotic spectacles. When tourists look at the Pyramid or the Eiffel Tower, they are not merely seeing these landmarks in isolation, but rather, they capture the popular gaze of Egypt as an exotic, ancient civilization or Paris as a haven for romance. The pursuit of signs is integral to the tourist experience, with tourists constantly seeking out "signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes" [4] etc.

This gaze is then captured, reproduced and distributed through the means of mobile images and representational technologies. This further reinforces this gaze and entrenches how future tourists interact with these spaces.

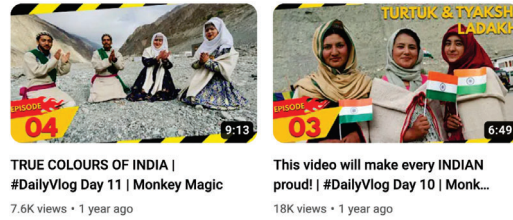


Figure 22.0.2: Blend of tourism and national identity in SMI MagicMonkey’s vlogs

Unraveling the nation through travel

A growing number of domestic travel SMIs are choosing to reject mainstream, commercial tourist spots (such as the Taj Mahal) as signs of India and instead offer new sites that they argue reflect the “real and raw” culture of India. By doing so they perpetuate new objects of the tourist gaze. This vision however is not a passive reflection of reality that is simply *out there* but rather an epistemic field that is carefully curated to signify what SMIs frame as the real India. And with it a certain brand of nationhood.

Scholars like Lowenthal (1975) have argued that visiting heritage sites by domestic tourists helps in creation and sustenance of an united national identity through reaffirmation of national meanings and values [7]. Tourism therefore becomes essential in the ideological representation of a nation-state.

Benedict Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an “imagined community”. Imagined, since despite never meeting most of their country’s inhabitants, one still feels a shared sense of belonging to a group. Community since this imagination is rooted in “horizontal comradeship” between members of the state despite “actual inequality and exploitations that may prevail in each”[1]. Building on Anderson’s work on how print capitalism helps forge nationalism, certain political scholars have showcased similar mechanisms at play between cyberspace and nationalism [8].

Travel SMIs, through domestic technologies, contribute to intensified circulation of tourism-centered content which play an active role in not only informing but also creating a certain imagination of the nation.

Authentic, Undiscovered India

To prod viewers to travel, these SMIs employ the rhetoric of dual discovery - of the real, untouched India and through it of oneself. Through their

destination choices and narrative, they construct a frame that insinuates that the real nation exists far away from the urban viewer, towards more interior, peripheral and neglected sects of the nation. Indian villages' unique ethnic diversity along with its absence (or slow adoption) of modernity, provides a spatio-temporal difference that SMIs tap onto to advocate as vacation sites for urban-dwelling domestic tourists. This imagination therefore necessitates the viewers' displacement - whether physical or corporeal - in articulating the nation.

This is demonstrated by SMIs employing phrases like *heart of nation; unseen, untouched corner; hidden gem; nobody knows about them; The [destination] that we never knew existed; you won't believe this is in India* as titles for their videos.

However, selection of these unseen sites are not as innocent as they appear. Only countryside that are visually appealing to prospective viewers are selected. These usually reflect the visual splendor of the place - a beautiful sunset on a mountain-range, a secret water-fall or perhaps a quaint monastery. These videos feature the picturesque, while omitting other markers of rural landscape such as "farm machinery, telegraph wires, derelict land, polluted water"[1].

These landscapes are sometimes juxtaposed and drawn parallel to sites in the West, with SMIs reacting with both surprise and subsequent pride in India. Ronnie & Barty are couple travelers known for their joint youtube account of the same name, boasting 348k Youtube. Their videos regularly demonstrate this phenomenon - having referred to mountain-ranges of domestic villages in Ladakh as reminiscent of Italian Dolomites and Icelandic towns. Such rhetoric further peddles the narrative of the authentic, waiting to be discovered Indian beauty. One that can rival even the West - evoking a nationalist sentiment of pride while implicitly revealing the colonial hangover rampant in Indian society

Facade of unanimously happy, conflict-free India

Another recurring motif in these videos is one of domesticating the exotic. First these videos hook the viewer with a promise of the real, unknown heart of the nation. These are then framed by shots that are not dissimilar to the Western tourist's gaze - deconstructing rural and peripheral locations as the *Exotic Other*. An example of this would be a shot of ethnic women dressed in

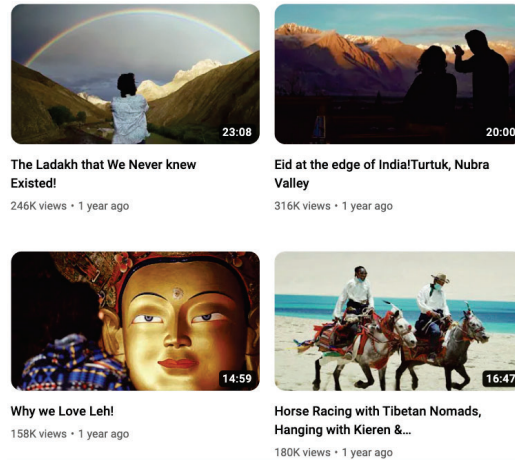


Figure 22.0.3: Frame from Ronnie and Barty’s Youtube channel. Depiction of the *Exotic Other* and Unseen India

regional costumes participating in festivities. However, once the SMI begins interacting with the natives, similarities and commonness are increasingly highlighted. For instance, videos in the North-East have multiple shots of happy, laughing local children playing cricket and consuming maggi just like in the mainland.

The narrative implies that if one really looks, people in India are not all that different. Regardless of where citizens are situated, they’re all one people belonging to the same nation-state. This is a nationalist framing that “attempts to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state” [5] erasing any signs of conflict/discord.

MonkeyMagic’s videos often draw his confessions on having “intense bouts of belonging”, “home-like feeling”, “finding a small family” when describing his journeys. He remarks astonishment at being able to so easily forge strong connections despite cultural and language barriers. However, by framing indigenous communities as the *Exotic other*, these SMIs only superficially represent their cultures. Similarly it erases the NorthEast region’s long history of neglect by the Indian mainland and Insurgency movements. Such omissions allow SMIs to sell these visions as reproducible day-dreams and fantasies to viewers. .

Moreover, these videos also articulate a vision of the nation-state where abysmal poverty resides with resounding happiness. People are ultimately big-hearted, great and good people who live in harmony with everyone. These destinations are framed as “little unsuspected paradise(s), where all is peace, rusticity and happy poverty.”[1]



Figure 22.0.4: A picture from travel SMI Isa Khan’s Instagram Feed depicting children from Leh in regional attire

These videos often regurgitate essential narratives of the locals and how helpful and gratuitous they are. However this production of the video masks

- The economic transaction that renders this subservience and kindness of the hospitality and travel entrepreneurs
- any mishaps or rude encounters

Conclusion

Travel SMIs peddle a narrative to domestic viewers that they don’t know the real India. It’s elsewhere. It’s exotic and undiscovered. However through various encounters with the travel SMIs, similarities and one-ness of the natives and the SMIs (and in-conjunction the viewer) are revealed because they’re all ultimately Indians. This is a domestication of the exotic that employs the nation as a frame. Viewers thereby formulate a conception of these spatial sites in particular, and the nation-state in general, not via direct experience but by idealized representations that they interiorize via videos produced by travel SMIs.

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