TOURISM: LINKING CULTURES

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INTRODUCTION:

Travel is indeed a “Mind Opener” as it enables us to understand other cultures and by doing so get to ‘know’ our own culture better. We are able to develop a more expansive worldview rather than the ‘frog in the well’ tendency that is so common otherwise. As we travel more and more we start to realize that the ‘earlier’ highlighted differences between East and West don’t really exist anymore. Today we only have the comparisons between the ‘ancient and modern’ as the world has indeed become a global family.

Tourism is an excellent tool, a veritable window onto cultural ethos worldwide. Of course the providing of such an expansive window may have both positive and negative effects upon the local culture, its development or destruction depending on how well or how badly this ‘tool’ is used. Cultural tourism has become a key word in modern economic circles and encompasses both the use of culture to propagate the ‘business’ of tourism as well as use tourism to help sustain and develop the traditional cultural ethos unique to each part of the world.

Treating the words tourism and culture as acronyms, we can create interesting expansions of the two words in order to stimulate our understanding of the inherent qualities hidden within these two terms. For example the expansion of the word culture enables us to understand the interwoven matrix between its components such as community, interpersonal relationships (understanding), lifestyle, travel, uniqueness, religious mores and environmental experiences.

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<th>CULTURE</th>
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<td>C - COMMUNITY</td>
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<td>U - UNDERSTANDING</td>
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<td>L - LIFESTYLE</td>
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The expansion of the word tourism enables us to understand that tourism is related to a showcasing of the local traditions as well as other outstanding qualities of the area. It also works towards the upliftment of the area. It takes a look at ground reality and creates an integration and understanding of the social structures and customs as well as the management abilities required for the financial success of such ventures. Culture is for sure a Unique Selling Point and the modern tourism industry has finally woken up to its potential and has begun to highlight it more and more.

Travel enables us to break stereotypes as we get to see the reality of life on the other side rather than the mere propaganda put out with vested interests. This is true of the Russians vs Americans divide as well as the North vs South Italian divide that is so similar to our own North vs South
Indian divide. Racial stereotyping can be abolished only when we see other cultures and realize the greatness in diversity of human beings and their customs and mores. The grass always seems greener on other side, till we go there and realize that everything is ultimately very similar everywhere. This is like the pious people living in Rameshwaram travelling to Kashi to wash away their sins while those living in Kashi travel to Rameshwaram to remove theirs!

THE WORLD IS SURELY A SMALL PLACE!

I have had many interesting experiences during my marvelous world tours in the past few years that enabled me to realize that the world is surely a very small place. When my hosts dropped me off at the San Francisco international terminal after a great time in California, the last thing I was expecting was to have another “the world is a small place” experience. The security officer checking my passport at the passenger entry point had a look at it and then looking at me asked, “Are you from Pondicherry?” Having become accustomed to officials having doubts about this white guy with an Indian passport, I was half expecting to have to make a detailed explanation when he started talking in chaste Tamil. He then introduced himself as a native of Cuddalore, a town just 20 kilometers down the coast from Pondicherry. You can very well imagine so many new brain cells popping open in my head as I realized the amazing situation where I was literally halfway around the world and then I go and hand over my passport to a guy hailing from so near my hometown of Pondicherry! Similarly when my hosts in the UK organized a grand Indo-Welsh musical night at Wales would anyone have expected me to be performing with a guy who hailed from my neighboring Chennai! Well that is what happened as Diwakar who is now settled in Wales for nearly two decades, is an excellent percussionist and so we ended up having a gala concert. Of course the added bonus was that as he had come with family and friends, I had a lot of my fellow Tamil speakers to communicate with at many a level. The Berlin part of my tour gave me a chance to meet a wonderful correspondence course student of ours and imagine my surprise when after a few hours of lovely conversation I came to know that she had a friend in Pondicherry. Upon further discussion it turned out that one of my close colleagues in the Auroville Health Centre was actually an old classmate of hers from her school days in the Lawrence School near Simla! Of course the best example of this “Small world” phenomenon was when we went to dine out at a South Indian restaurant in Berlin and enjoyed the lovely authentic Masala Dosa. When I complimented the owner on it and started talking to him, I came to know that the chef in the kitchen was from Pondicherry! Not only that but he was from an area that was very close to the old ashram in Lawspet where I grew up. Imagine my going all the way to Berlin and having a Dosa cooked by a guy from Pondicherry. What are the odds on that?

THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

So many tourists come to our country from abroad and our tourism ministry in all its wisdom has coined the phrase “Incredible India- the Mantra to woo tourists”. The first part of the statement is undoubtedly very true but then the second part seems like an ignorant mistake in giving the game away! India is surely incredible but the rest of the phrase is to be understood by us and not shouted out aloud to our guests, thus displaying our naivety. “Real” culture is not to be found in our 5 star hotels and unless the tourists get to see the real India we are doing great disservice to the greatness of our cultural heritage. All visitors to India go back with an ‘unforgettable’ experience, but isn’t it out dharma to make sure it is a positive one?
Coming to India is always a physical, intellectual and emotional stunner for most visitors as the noise, dust and mingling crowds with the accompanying jarring noise levels is something they would have never really ever previously experienced or imagined in their wildest dreams. On top of that I do doubt whether we treat guests fairly? So often we hear stories of guests being ‘taken for a ride’, cheated, tormented, abused and molested in our country for no reason other than their ‘white skin’. When such experiences are reported back home, what image do we cut for ourselves? Why cannot we take pride in giving our guests a marvelous experience thus enabling the worldview of our country to grow positively? We need to work on taking the positive aspects of our culture to them and at the same time try to imbibe the best of their culture so that we then create a “best of both worlds” situation.

**MY UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AS A “WHITE TAMILIAN/INDIAN”**

When I was at college in Nagpur, it was a totally alien situation for me. I had to learn a new language and a new culture, in addition to my medical studies. Then I observed people’s attitudes towards me because I was different; in my class of about 100 students, I was the only white person. The medical college had about 500 students, and the dental college next door had about 400 students, and still I was the only white person. It kept a check on me, because I did not dare to do anything wrong. I could never skip a lecture or do anything wrong, because in any situation I was immediately recognized; for me it was almost a kind of chastity belt. Then I realized that if I did something good then people would remember me easily, so I started to build on that idea. In my college studies I got the highest marks in every exam, receiving a gold medal in preventative medicine, and a distinction in surgery. It still hurts sometimes when I walk down the street and someone makes a comment about my white skin. As a boy, I learned to speak Tamil, and in a sense it became my first language. I played with Tamil kids, and even today I often still think in Tamil before English. I am basically an Indian, a Tamilian and a Pondicherrian in a sort of disguise, and I cannot relate to anything else.

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN UNDERSTANDING OTHER CULTURES**

I have been privileged to travel abroad ten times in the past few years. Of course I travelled a lot with my parents when I was a child but those memories are not as fresh as the ones I have had in the past few years. These tours have enabled me to ‘see’ some wonderful aspects of other cultures and also find similarities with our own. It has also taught me that the modern western world is not necessarily cleaner, nor are trains always on time in the UK!!

When visiting Genova, Italy I had a chance to go to the *Palazzo Ducale* and walk through the Tower and Old prison. It made me realize, “Sometimes we think we don’t have freedom in our lives but to imagine the plight of the prisoners in their cells really sends a shiver down the spine making us more aware of all the freedom we do have!” Visiting the dilapidated remains of the house of Christopher Columbus reminded me of what an audacious life he lived! Imagine going half way across the world and then claiming as the property of your queen someone’s homeland, where they have lived with traditions thousands of years old!

The trip to the unique water city of Venice that left my wife and me open mouthed in wonder. The waterways have such an impressive feel to them and the experience of waiting for the next boat (Vaporetti) at the ‘bus stops’ or rather ‘boat stops’ while witnessing the “streets” of the
Grand Canal cannot be captured in mere words. The maritime portion of Venice has no roads as such, being composed almost entirely of narrow footpaths, and laid out across islands connected by stone footbridges, making transportation impossible by almost anything with wheels. To be in a city without cars, scooters or even bicycles was quite a funny experience through we missed none of them. It is quite astonishing to know that the buildings of Venice are constructed on closely spaced wooden piles that are still intact after centuries of submersion. The foundations rest on the piles, and buildings of brick or stone sit above these footings. The piles penetrate the sand and mud until they reach a much harder layer of compressed clay. Submerged by water the wood is petrified until it becomes a stone-like structure. Difficult to imagine modern humans building such things though we claim so much of advancement!

On my tour of South Africa I had a very special trip to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years of imprisonment!!! Such a power place with real heaving feeling that reaches in and touches you deeply-why do humans make other fellow humans suffer? Cried unabashedly when the guide was telling us the story of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe who really suffered for thinking out of the box. Why is that we humans as a race have to "push off" those who are different? Why cannot we understand each other better - so many questions came to mind as we went through the Robben Island prison where so many suffered like the Indian freedom fighters did in the Kalapani prisons of the Andaman islands. It is a grim reminder of what is done all over the world to those who decide to be 'different' than the mob. It however helped me understand and appreciate Nelson Mandela even more than ever, for he had come back from that suffering and still could open up in such a humane way through his Gandhi-like policies of integration and harmonious co-existence rather than vindictiveness so typical of so many around the globe. Personally I feel that most prisoners on that island must have gone through immense spiritual self development either consciously or unconsciously for the human spirit does grow in such oppressed and grim situations more than in the comfortable and enjoyable ones. Of course that takes a special type of human being to realize it and I feel Mandela is surely one of those chosen ones, who choose to let the best occur in themselves.

YOGA IN THE MODERN WORLD

Having given workshops, classes, lectures, performances and talks in the USA, UK, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa I think I have seen a bit of the modern Yoga world. I have also had the chance to be “up to date” on all modern Yoga news thanks to the numerous Yoga journals that come to us from every part of the globe. The general impression one gets from most Yoga magazines is that the west is only interested in the physical aspects of Yoga or take to it as a fancy that lasts not too long. I have however found that my experiences in the west have been quite different! I have found that there are many sincere seekers who desire the ‘real thing’ and some who have imbied Yoga into their very essence.

Generally Indians seem to have Yoga built into their genes whether they know of it or not. Scratch any Indian and you will find a Yogi hidden inside. However we take our cultural heritage for granted and will not appreciate ‘that’ which is right in front of us. We lack a sense of discipline and easily fall back on the crutch of ‘it’s my karma’. On the other hand, I find western Yoga students more disciplined and capable of greater intellectual analytical understanding. Yet, they are handicapped by the lack of a typical Indian understanding of universal connective-ness and don’t have the benefit of cultural concepts that have been around for thousands of years.
Ultimately a good student transcends every barrier and every limitation and I have wonderful students and members of my Yoga family from every corner of the globe today.

What I have understood from all these experiences is that there are sincere Yogis and Yoga Sadhakas everywhere in the world and that we must not label the east or west either as good or bad. Instead we need to works on imbibing the best of the east and the best of the west in a true yogic integration.

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