

Stereotyping India's North East: Examining the "Paradise Unexplored" in Tourism Discourse

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Abstract

India's North East had been perceived for decades as a hotbed of insurgency, unrest, backwardness, and buffer against any Chinese aggression. Tourists from India and abroad had consciously avoided this region for years from the perspective of security. To counter this negative perception and promote the brand image of the region, *Paradise Unexplored: India's North East* campaign has positioned it as the unspoiled idyll of India. But in doing so, it has constructed the North East as the "other" of India; by reinforcing the myth of difference and remoteness, it has transformed the North East into a living museum of India. This paper attempts to study the construction of the North-East as an 'unexplored Paradise' by analyzing representation of the region in one of the most successful campaigns of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, *Incredible India* campaign. The campaign, while branding India as the transcendental, magical, mesmerizing wonderland, relegates the North-East to the 'exotic/erotic *Unspoilt Other*'. Instead of bridging the gap between mainland India and the North East, which had subsisted for decades, it has reaffirmed the age-old perceptions that had been part of the dominant discourse about the region in India.

Keywords: tourist gaze, representation, exoticization, semiotic analysis, misperceptions.

Introduction

India's North East is the most misunderstood and misrepresented part of the country. Whether the misunderstanding is a result of misrepresentation, or the other way round, the fact remains that all these sixty seven years since Independence, have failed to integrate the ethnic people of the region to the mainstream culture and consciousness, notwithstanding, their sizeable presence in almost all the metropolitan cities throughout the country in the capacity of students, government and private sector employees, journalists and mass media professionals. The North East people subsist along the margins of the dominant Hindu majoritarian centre, as a distinct ethnic community, inconspicuous and ignored. This had been the trend for decades, till a sharp rise in recent years of unprovoked assaults and cases of sexual harassments against the people from the region throughout the country. A closer study of such attacks has revealed a deep racial insidiousness among the mainstream community against people of North eastern origin, which surprisingly was absent even a few years back. What has prompted such a spurt of racial acrimony has been an issue of much debate and concern both within and outside the region. Violence results from misperception and ignorance of the perspective of the other, and a self-perceived threat to one's existence. The ontogeny of the North-eastern community in India is one of misrepresentation and fabrication; from obscurity/ indifference to exoticisation; from projection

of self-identities to encroaching aliens. The mainland India's perceptions about the ethnic communities of the North-East is embedded in ignorance and projection of the inverted self-image of the mainstream Indian identity and constructed through sustained media campaigns to market the region as a pristine tourist haven. This paper intends to study the construction of the North-East as an 'unexplored Paradise' by analysing representation of the region in one of the most successful campaigns of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, *Incredible India!* campaign. For the purpose, the researcher proposes to analyse the discourse of tourism in the e- brochure *Northeast Pages*, and study how through a conjunction of verbal and visual texts, India's North East is represented as an exciting, alluring, and desirable tourist destination. The *Incredible India!* campaign, while branding India as the transcendental, magical, mesmerising wonderland, relegates the North-East to the 'exotic/erotic *Unspoilt Other*'.

Text and Methodology

The 'Incredible India' campaign was launched by Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, both on a national and international level in 2002 with the mission of nation branding for the purpose of aggressively marketing India as an attractive tourist destination. As the official website declared, 'the primary objective of this branding exercise was to create a distinctive identity for the country' (<http://incredibleindiacampaign.com/>). This campaign was extensively used across all channels of communication with tremendous success both for domestic and international markets till 2009. Almost a decade later, it came to the notice that even though the campaign was highly successful in augmenting foreign tourist inflow in mainland India from 2.38 million in 2002 to 6.29 million in 2011, India's North-East had remained largely neglected during the same period. To rectify that, the North Eastern Council, an agency funded by Govt. of India, decided to launch a campaign specifically aimed for the North East, *India's North-East: Paradise Unexplored*. In line with the e-tourist guide book, *India brochure*, a new brochure exclusively for the region *North-East pages* was launched for a pre-visit initiation. Both the brochures are available at www.incredibleindia.org as e-books. As all Tourist brochures do, these brochures also rely extensively on visual and verbal texts to promote destination images. The verbal texts are again divided into descriptive and informative sections. For the present research, the descriptive sections of the brochure and the visual images are the texts considered for investigation into construction of geographical knowledge and identity myths of the North-East. The methodologies used in this study are discourse analysis of the verbal texts and content and semiotic analyses of the visual texts.

The Discourse of Tourism

Tourism, pleasure travel and holiday making are often considered trivial and marginal social activities which are interjections in our schedule of daily routine activities. These are deviant social practices which can be contrasted with our more mundane and material concerns and investigated into to understand how these deviant activities in fact reinforce our normal and modern social concerns and perspectives. Our preference for selective tourist destinations and our attitude towards destination subjectivities are constructed in a 'binary opposition' (Mocini, 2005, p. 154) to the notion of our self-identities, home and our everyday experience. In other words, our tourist gaze is based on expectation of intense pleasure, through presumptive fantasizing, of a different nature or involving different senses from those usually encountered at home and the work place. Such a desiring gaze is evoked, constructed and sustained through

multiple media exposures like TV, film, literature and tourist brochures. Dann in his book *The Language of Tourism* points out that tourism, in the act of promotion, as well as in the accounts of its practitioners and clients, has a discourse of its own. He explains that 'the language of tourism is a great deal more than a metaphor. Via static and moving pictures, written texts and audio-visual offerings, the language of tourism attempts to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings and, in doing so, convert them from potential into actual clients'(1996, p.2). According to Greimas and Courtès, 'the tourist brochure is the spatial representation of a tension between an individual and a targeted valuable object' (quoted in Mocini, 2005, p.154). Renzo Mocini points out the crucial role of tourist brochures in creating 'an initial Proppian deficiency in the would-be-tourist' (2005, p. 154) to be fulfilled in the forthcoming holiday. A tourist brochure thus presupposes an implicit lack or deficiency in the tourist subjectivity which is to be fulfilled in conjunction with the destination experiences. For this it 'construes valorisation' (Mocini 2005, p.154) and exoticisation of a destination even at the cost of misrepresentation or skewed representation 'through accurately chosen images and through a number of linguistic devices' (Mocini 2005, p. 154).

Quian, Wei and Zhu in their study on the representation of the sexuality of Mosou tribe in the popular discourses of Lugu Lake, a tourist destination in China's Yunnan province, point out that the experience of a place is 'negotiated through the formation of human subjectivity' (2012, p.107). They refer to Wright's pioneering work in highlighting that 'the imaginative production of geographical knowledge presented a new vision, a new recreation, rather than a simple duplication of scientific "realities". The production of geographical knowledge, in this sense, is fraught with human desires, motives and prejudices. The geographical imagination is the projection of self-identities upon spaces and places, and a process of fabrication and poesis' (2012, p.107). In their study, they investigate the various ways in which 'complex processes of identity and subject-formation can be organised and articulated in the production of geographical narratives' (2012, p.107). A tourism discourse thus, propagates an imaginative geographical knowledge which is often based on a careful selection, manipulation and exclusion of spectacles, places and identities in order to create the desired illusion of tourist experience.

The Construction of Paradise

The notion of Paradise itself is problematic, as it is a subjective construction based on one's desires and fantasies, antipodal to one's notion of reality. A paradise is imagined to be remote, of difficult terrain, not easily accessible, but once there, one may expect sensory gratification and indulgence of all sorts unavailable in one's everyday existence. The topographical features and geographical remoteness of the North Eastern region is interpreted in paradisiacal paradigm in the first section 'Passage to North East'.

*Embarking on a journey of India's remote eight states of the North East is a tumultuous but rewarding one. ... The **infinite** variety of its geographic setting, its topography, its varied flora and fauna and avian life... all make it a holiday **wonderland** that's **just begging** to be **discovered** afresh. Discovering the North Eastern states... is a challenge-yet a **romantic adventure** in the best traditions of travel and discovery. Connected by an infinite **chain of pearly threads**... the North Eastern states... offer visitors a rare feast-a kaleidoscopic **fiesta** that **lures** you with its **magical** richness and **stunning** variety. The **raw** natural beauty, **rare** orchids and butterflies, **brightly painted** monasteries, challenging rivers, intricately woven tribal shawls, indigenous sports- ...the traveller [is] ... **mesmerised** by its **dazzling** variety and **compelling appeal** (North East Pages, 2013, p. 5)*

The predominant motif in the 'Passage to the North East' section is one of discovery; the rich variety, vibrancy, and raw beauty of the region is presented on a platter waiting for the tourist to be explored. The discourse is couched in colonialist idioms, where the destination is represented as 'begging to be discovered afresh', 'luring' the tourist with 'magical richness' 'stunning variety', 'compelling appeal' etc. Such persuasive tone and promises of out of the world fulfillment constructs the North East as an object of gaze and indulgence, eager to be experienced. The verbal text of a tourist brochure constructs a tourist destination by using superlatives and hyperbolic expressions like the ones highlighted in the above passage to create a sense of allurement and suspension of disbelief, so that a desire is evoked to physically visit those places.

The objectification of the region is further accentuated with a full page blow up photograph of an ethnic girl in bright blue traditional attire between the Content page and the 'Passage to the North East' section, as if welcoming the tourist from the threshold of paradise. The next chapters are dedicated to individual states of the region, also known as the eight sisters of the North East. Each state is subtitled with a USP of the exotism that the brochure promises every tourist of experiencing during the travel.

Arunachal Pradesh the '*Mysterious, Magical and Mystical*' is called the first state to be '*kissed by the morning sun... set to blaze ahead on the tourist trail*' (p.8)

Assam is the '*Home of the Brahmaputra*' (p.9),

Manipur is '*Little Paradise*' (p.10).

While Meghalaya has '*Many hues of Nature*' (p.11),

Mizoram is the "*Songbird of the North East*' (p.12)

Nagaland is '*The Land of Festivals*' (p.13),

Sikkim is '*Just Heaven*' (p.14)

While Tripura, is '*a Laboratory of Exotic Cultural Synthesis*' (p. 15).

The Visual Culture of Tourism

Lana Domšić argues that 'touristic photography is a powerful medium that shapes the image of the tourist destination it represents and has a crucial role in creation of place and identity myths. Although photography holds the same subjective, interpretative potential as text, it appears to be believable as a direct representation of reality, a true reflection of actual places, people and events. Used in destination promotion, visual images are likely to influence recipients' perception of a destination, generate certain attitudes and influence visiting intentions' (2013, p. 277). Critics like MacCannel (1976) and Urry (1990) have also pointed out the 'crucial and formative role of the gaze for structuring touristic expectations, experiences and memories' (Domšić, 2013, p. 277) in their works. According to them 'the tourist tries to make sense of what he sees through signs and symbols which themselves provide meaning and tangibility to what is essentially an intangible experience (Domšić, 2013, p. 277). Even though a tourist destination has a strong ethnic identity and a sense of place, rooted in history and culture, visual texts in tourism discourse often 'selectively extracts from this multifaceted expression and reduces it to a series of icons. This distorts the identity and trivialises the place and contributes to the consuming nature of tourism' (Domšić, 2013, p.278). According to Domšić, 'people's perception of particular places are indebted to place-myths, that is, conglomerates of place-images in forms of clichés and stereotypes

associated with particular locations, in circulation within the society' (2013, p.278). Visual texts in touristic brochures, thus, become an ally of the 'dominant ideology of a society, reproducing and disseminating only those preferred images which privilege only particular versions of destinations' cultural identity' (Domšić, 2013, p.278) .

The North East pages has an array of photographic images selected carefully to reinforce the hegemonic perception of mainland India about the region as well as to evoke the desired touristic anticipation in the would-be-visitor. There are a total of 223 images which are first coded according to the dominant theme conveyed in them. The results of the content analysis of the images in *North East Pages* are shown in the following table:

Coding Categories	Recurrence	Percentage
Natural Scenery/Tourist sites	90	40%
Traditional Sports / Cultural Activities	41	18%
Ethnic lifestyle, crafts/products	28	12.5%
Wildlife images	20	8.9%
Close-up images of ethnic women in groups of not more than two	22	9.8%
Close-up images of ethnic men in groups of not more than two	4	1.7%
Adventure Sport Activities	16	7.1%
Images of modernity/urban life	2	.8%

The results show that 40% of the total images are of natural landscapes and tourist sites, both natural and manmade. The landscape photos are all invariably long shots of isolated, unspoilt nature without any presence of people anywhere; of snow clad mountain tops, lush green hills, valleys, blue skies with white clouds, meandering rivers, river islands. The objective of these images is to showcase the region as an idyllic, natural haven. The absence of human beings implies that the tourists will be exploring a virgin landscape. A good number of images in this category feature various ancient religious sites or temples of worship of different religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and indigenous practices, thus highlighting the pluralistic religious identity of the place, which is also the basis of Indian secularism. The next category presents images of Traditional sports and Cultural and Religious activities unique to each state covering 18% of the total images. These images with their depiction of unique dress codes, cultural activities and traditional sports reinforce the ethnic identities of different groups of people residing in the region. The third category which constitutes 12.5% also emphasizes the ethnic, artistic and culinary diversity of the region. These three categories which constitute 70% of the total images contribute towards brand making of the North East as a place distinct from mainland India, belonging to a different period, a place of mysticism and spirituality, of self-discovery and communion with nature in utmost seclusion. Wild life images and Adventure sport

activities constituting 8.9% and 7.1% eroticize the region further while making it attractive for foreign trekkers and adventure seekers as well, positioning the region competitively beside other tourist spots in the Himalayan circuit. Close up images of ethnic women constitute the next important category with almost 10% images. It is interesting to note that almost all the women selected for representation of their ethnicity are young, good looking, smiling, as markers of desirability. For both domestic and foreign tourists, North East women represent the 'other' of the Indian women; naive, liberal and different. Most significant is the absence of images of modern activities and urban life with only two from this category; one with a panoramic view of Aizawl city with its concrete jungle on the slant of the hill, the other projecting an European tourist couple along with other national tourists spending an idle morning on a boulevard in Gangtok. No image features any North Easterner in regular modern outfits, only in tribal costumes, when in reality it is rare to find one in such gears except in ceremonial appearances.

According to MacCannell (1976), the tourist quest is 'the quest for authentic. This desire, he argues, arises out of alienation of the modern society and the desire to retrieve the authentic' (Domšić, 2013, p. 281), to catch the *real* place, the *real* people in their pristine glory. But the irony is that this *real*, the *original* no longer exist; the lustre of modernity has transformed and hybridized all traces of the authentic. Now it is the job of tourism discourse with its multimedia campaigns and promotions to construct the authentic, in the minds of the would-be-tourists and then present them with a simulation of those packaged and piecemeal realities. The fact is that even the tourists are not interested in discovering the changed face of the authentic, the mundane reality of the destinations and the ubiquity of existential struggles and conflicts. This is because the primary objective of every travel is an escape from oneself, one's vicissitudes and realities. A tourist destination must offer a traveller an experiential paradox, it should allow him to experience what he is not, yet always wanted to be; it should be a place where he can't live, yet always wanted to live. This is a dichotomy which is inherent in every tourism discourse and is behind stereotypical projection of any tourist destination.

Conclusion

India's North East had been perceived for decades as a hotbed of insurgency, unrest, backwardness, and a strategic buffer against any Chinese aggression. Tourists from India and abroad had consciously avoided this region for years due to security concerns. To counter this negative perception and promote the brand image of the region, the *Paradise Unexplored: India's North East* campaign has positioned it as the unspoilt idyll of India. But in doing so, it has constructed the North East as the 'other' of India; by reinforcing the myth of difference and remoteness, it has transformed the North East into a living museum of India. This eroticization of the region adds to misperceptions about the region and the people, leading to their further alienation.

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