CHAOS, CURRIES AND CURIOSITIES: SOME EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF INDIAN CULTURE FOR FOREIGN TOURISTS

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Abstract: The culture of India has held a special attraction for international tourists. The vast landmass of the subcontinent offers a kaleidoscope of diversity. Though the country has a vast and varied resource base of tourism product, the top of mind awareness of India remains concentrated in the images of the 'Taj Mahal' huge population, colours, food, culture, customs and particularly the all-pervasive 'chaos' that forms the heartbeat of the country. This paper aims at gaining insight into the distinct aspects of India and Indian culture that tourists find curious, captivating, fascinating, shocking, and incomprehensible. The study concludes that India provides both an 'intimidating' and 'exhilarating' travel experience. The challenging country full of unpredictable surprises (both pleasant and unpleasant) is discovered as a 'universe' in itself, which delivers everything conceivable for tourists and much more. For the experiential tourists, with all its positives and negatives, a visit to India culminates into a profound 'life changing' experience that no other country can offer.

Keywords: India, Culture, Chaos, Experiential Tourism

Introduction

For centuries, the cultures of the occident have intrigued the oriental tourists. 'Culture' is a wide word, a complex 'whole' that encapsulates people, society, history, religion, architecture, cuisine, handicrafts, attire, customs, social institutions, behavioural norms, art forms, music, etc. The desire to see, experience and learn about the culture of various societies has motivated man since time immemorial to travel widely to satisfy his curiosities. The 'other' culture, i.e. different to one's own, has always held a fascination for tourists.

In its earliest form, cultural tourism emerged during the 'Grand Tour' era when intellectuals and the learned elite class of people in Western Europe ventured out to explore the land, people and lifestyle of other countries with the aim of educating oneself and widening one's horizons. People were particularly drawn towards Italy and Greece. Undertaking the Grand Tour also became a status symbol in high society. During early history of travel and tourism, culture existed in its raw, authentic, organic, and unaltered form alone. However, once tourism was identified as a lucrative business, culture started being encashed upon for commercial gains through a transformation into 'staged authenticity' that was consciously choreographed and showcased for earning the tourist dollar. In present times both 'organic' and 'staged' culture, coexist to attract tourists. While organic culture runs deep in the veins of a society and its lifestyle, staged culture is properly managed to be 'performed' and exhibited with the aim of attracting an audience. As masses of people have been travelling around the world to experience the culture of different countries, ample research in tourism has delved into studying 'cultural tourism' from different perspectives, i.e. motivation, religious and ethnic tourism, behaviour of cultural tourists and cultural consumption (Korstanje, 2012; Ozel and Kozak, 2012; Richards, 2018; Richards and Van Der Ark, 2013; Smith, 2003; Yang, 2011).

Particularly the cultures of the 'Orient', being varied and rich have always acted as magnets for tourists. While Asia offers a beautiful kaleidoscope of cultures, in Asia, the Indian subcontinent has flourished in tourism primarily on account of her inherent rich history and cultural diversity. The Indian land, people and their lifestyles have always intrigued tourists. For the foreign tourists, India is synonymous with the 'Taj Mahal'. Besides, the country is associated with stereotypical images of 'heat, dust, and mystique of snake charmers'. The other dominant association of India in the mind of tourists is the image of plenty of people, colour, religion, music and Bollywood. For the cultural enthusiast, the main reason for visiting India is to immerse in and experience the 'Other' (culture) which is strikingly different from home culture and hence piques curiosity (Picard and Di Giovine, 2014). With regard to this curiosity of 'otherness in tourism', an interesting observation in made by Echtner and Prasad (2003), who concur that 'otherness' is primarily a 'Western' produced representation, where the 'West' regards itself as the 'norm'/ 'focal point' and considers everything beyond itself as the 'other'. Regardless of what the 'other' is, the otherness of Indian culture has captivated the western tourists to be realized both as 'fascinating' and/or 'intimidating'. Some famous Hollywood movies like '*Eat, Pray, Love*', '*Million Dollar Arm*', *Slumdog Millionaire*', '*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*' and '*Outsourced*' among others, have attempted to showcase facets of Indian culture that have contributed to 'creation' or 'reinforcement' of images of India in the minds of the global population.

Experiential Dimension of Indian Culture / Tourism

Over recent years the study of tourist experience has engaged in in-depth research to gain insight into experiences that tourists have at destinations (McCabe, 2002; Mossberg, 2007; Ritchie and Hudson, 2009). The tourist experience is a result of an intense interplay of senses that are heavily bombarded upon by the extraneous environment. This sensational experience leads to what is termed as 'experiential tourism' (Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Larsen, 2007; McCabe, 2002; Uriely, 2005). Meacci and Liberatore (2018) talk about the 'sensory dimension' of experiential tourism and highlight that experiences are triggered stimulation of the senses, heart and mind. The 'sensory dimension' therefore assumes extreme importance in leading to the 'experiential dimension'. Urry (2002) suggests the use of the term 'sensescape' (a conglomeration of various senses). Urry's 'sensescape' includes, soundscapes, smellscapes, tastescapes and geographies of touch, i.e. skinscapes. All such identified 'sensecapes' play a crucial role in delivering the 'Indian' experience. Indicting the interplay of senses, one tourist has rightly reported his Indian experience, pointing out '*whether you demand it or not, it comes to you… from the time you land afoot at a destination to the time you have left.. what you see, what you sense, what you smell*'. Khan (2013) finds out that foreign tourists to India largely report the Indian travel experience as 'sensational', 'unparalleled' and 'unique'.

MacCannell (1993) believes that all tourism is a 'cultural experience'. Stebbins (1996) suggests that people are motivated by 'cultural tourism' to seek aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological experiences. Depth of desired cultural experiences has also been studied by Du Cros and McKercher (2014). The experience is for those who like to immerse in everyday life of the locals and see the culture (Richards, 2011). Culture can be best experienced by 'living like a local' (Richard and Russo, 2016). While experiences can be gained through staged authenticity as well, authentic 'experiential tourism' occurs best only in commonplace 'unaltered' settings. Hence the real experience of any culture can be attained only through merging spontaneously with the flow of daily local life at a destination. Foreign tourists who have travelled to India, specifically for culture or any other motivation, have often reported interesting experiences that they have had in the 'otherness' of Indian culture, a culture which comprises a multitude of colourful threads intricately woven into the fabric of daily existence. With respect to the classification of cultural tourists given by McKercher (2002), India can be

identified as a country for the 'purposeful cultural tourist', a tourist who seeks and gains a deep cultural experience; or the 'serendipitous cultural tourist' who visits cultural attractions and ends up having a deep cultural experience.

The rich culture of India is omnipresent, manifest in everything the country has to offer. It is impossible for any visitor to go untouched by the intensity of the sensory overload of Indian culture. Even for an 'environment bubble' tourist, it is hard to escape seeing, experiencing or avoid being emotionally touched by some aspect of the sensational culture that often leaves deep impressions in the minds of tourists. Research on the Indian experience gained by tourists suggests that the country is positively experienced as 'unique', 'pulsating', 'alive', 'intense' and famous for her cultural diversity; while negatively, India is found to be rather 'challenging', 'intimidating' and 'chaotic' (Khan, 2013).

This paper discusses some distinct aspects of the understanding of India and Indian culture that intrigue, fascinate, amuse, are incomprehensible and even intimidate tourists (both prospective foreign tourists and the ones who have already been to India). The paper is based upon the author's interaction with foreigners (while living abroad), their perceptions, queries and curiosities of India that they have addressed with the author and sought answers to. In addition, for the purpose of gauging the views and experiences of tourists who have already been to India, the study has accessed online travel reviews, write ups, blogs and travel accounts of tourists who have written about their Indian travel experiences. Websites that provide information on what to expect from travel to India, have also provided data. The recondite aspects of Indian culture and other striking and fascinating observations made in the country are elaborated upon in the ensuing discussion.

Crowds, Commotion, Claustrophobia and Energy

On their very first travel experience to India, the huge Indian 'population' is found as most 'overwhelming' by tourists, detrimental to the experiences they have. India is the second most populous country with 1.3 billion people. Indeed, tourists coming to India from lesser populated countries are instantly taken aback right on arrival, swarmed by a tsunami of people. A surprised tourist reports '*Look how many people there are. A staggering population of 1.3 billion people can be a shock for first time visitors, who are not aware of India's growing population*.' Another one remarks, '*When I visited India, I was shocked about the amount of people in India. I mean I had heard about it before but seeing it in front of you was a different thing*.' The crowds are often experienced as claustrophobic and intimidating. A blogger writes '*expect the unexpected*' or else '*prepare to lose yourself*'. Another account of a tourist sums it up, saying, '*The mass of humanity in India can be overwhelming*! *Forget your own space*.' (Ladyflashman, 2016).

Excess population is the source of crowding. In research focused on 'Overtourism', crowding at destinations has primarily been studied with respect to 'tourist crowds' that impact the destination and life of residents therein (Dodds and Butler, 2019; Koens, Postma and Papp, 2018; Milano, Cheer and Novelli, 2019). However, literature is conspicuously lacking in studying crowding at destinations on account of 'resident population' that contributes to affecting the tourist experience. Mullins (1999) observes that crowding is characteristic of 'urban cities' and particularly 'Asian' destinations like China and India. Crowding is more apparent in populated spaces where the sense of 'carrying capacity' (Mathieson and Wall, 1982) seems to be lost. From her travel experiences in India, Cook (2019) observes that '*The amount of people in India is what really takes some getting used to though. There are just so many of them! They're everywhere, and you can't help but wonder where they all came from and where they're going*.' Hordes of people gathered everywhere, with or without work, make even

sprawling spaces seem congested. In India, there is the feeling of extreme activity, commotion, and a restless lively energy all around, which results from a combination of people, traffic, and noise. The constant sight of hustle-bustle triggers an adrenalin rush even within the calmest tourist, whose nerves are strongly jolted to become fully alert and active to brace the commotion. A startling observation is *'there are lots of people, crowded roads, energetic spirit, weirdly interesting. Everything feels different in India, I felt alive! I thought I had seen the world.'* Another review about India states, *'Visible and experienced commotion peps up a dead soul. Even the most passive visitor is shaken up with an adrenalin rush much to surprise, elation or shock as soon as one experiences the outside environment.'* It is *'Like you have suddenly become a part of Clubbing TV.'*

Other than human population, the sense of crowding is also enhanced by unplanned and haphazardly built spaces (buildings). At many places unplanned construction is seen clustered and cluttered with residential and commercial buildings of all shapes and sizes, old and new, barely inches apart from one another, maneuvered through narrow alleyways between them, which are always jam packed with people and traffic, all of which add on to the uneasy feeling of claustrophobia. Even at any prime tourist attraction (e.g. The Taj Mahal), a visit at any time of the day, looks like a 'full house', not allowing for much breathing space.

The crowds, commotion, claustrophobia and the lively energy can be summed up in a comment posted in a blog by Cleary (2020) who writes *'Over my journeys to India I've come to realize that life somehow seems much "larger" there – there's the chaos, the bustle, the beauty, but also the sheer number of people somehow ensure, that whatever your opinions on what to expect from your first trip to India, you'll never be quite right.'* She further describes India *'It is like no other place on earth*!'

Chaos, Cacophony and Composure

In addition to 'people everywhere', the realization of 'chaos' becomes evident to tourists through the sights and sounds of 24/7 traffic, compounded with nonstop noise. Bumper to bumper 'traffic' is the core component of the 'chaos' experienced by tourists in India. Ladyflashman (2016) points out, *'This ties in with the volume of people in India - there are lots of people so there's lots of traffic. And it is (to our western eyes) chaotic, dangerous and disorganized.'* Complete disregard for traffic rules is the prime reason for chaos on the roads. A comment states about India, *'It is a free country, people riding or driving on the wrong side of the street and they think nothing of it*' This comes both as a surprise and horror for tourists. *'Chaos is the word that best describes Indian roads! A trip in a taxi can be a hair-raising experience, let alone trying to cross a road as a pedestrian'* (Cook, 2019). There is a feeling that traffic rules are meant to be broken with complete brazenness and carelessness for safety of life. In the mad rush everyone seems to be competing for space and everyone is in a hurry *'no one gives way, everyone wants to overtake*!' Two, three and four wheelers along with pedestrians, all squeeze into every inch of space they find. Jumping traffic lights, endangering pedestrians, turning a blind eye to road signs, driving on the opposite side of the road, taking sudden forbidden U-turns, fighting it out with road rage, names dropping to escape being charged and even speedily sneaking from behind traffic policemen, are a usual phenomenon on Indian roads. Hence the Indian roads with minimal zebra crossings are often perceived as 'very scary' for tourists, where even being on the road in a vehicle proves to be a deadly adventure. A tourist comment rightly sums up *'We're not talking about everything in India, but on the surface, it can seem like there are no rules here. For that reason, tourists do need to be careful when crossing roads or walking. Things can get chaotic in India – especially on the streets where cars veer in all directions*. It's like 'freestyle' driving*.' The chaos on streets is not only of vehicular traffic but is a combination of all kinds of animals (dogs, cows and elephants, among others), pedestrians, street merchants,

cyclists and huge cargo transport. Many animals are worshiped, hence not driven away from roads. Among these the sacred 'Holy Cow' is seen being fed everywhere by people. It is a common sight to see cows walking or lazing all over, completely unperturbed, often sitting right in the middle of traffic congested roads with vehicles having to make way dodging around them.

The 'noise and cacophony' is another dimension of the experienced Indian chaos. Cook (2016) makes an interesting observation that '*India is not a quiet country*.' Constant honking (a rare sign of extreme anger in the western world) is a reflex action for people driving on Indian roads. Thousands of vehicles are seen sporting stickers of 'Please Honk' / 'Horn Please'. Horns go blaring 24/7. The louder the horn, more powerful/important, feels the driver. In a blogpost, a tourist reports '*Nowhere else have I heard so much honking and such variety of horns! Each night I drifted off listening to the circus symphony of sounds occurring outside my window.*' In addition, combined noises of blasting music from vehicles, calls of street sellers, animals, loudspeaker announcements, street processions or deafening sound effects from some function or event going about in private households or else places of worship, all produce a 24/7 din. '*Bring earplugs',* is an advice put out by one tourist. The frequent sight and sound effects of wedding band festivities (with gaiety of music and dancing) on busy streets amidst traffic, is not uncommon. To the incomprehensible surprise of foreigners, the single expression to describe this entire clamour is, '*unbelievable*!' No wonder many tourists feel '*there is never a dull moment on the streets.*' Hence, chaos is certainly enhanced by combined effects of all surprising sights and sounds (Russell, 2002).

A third dimension that contributes in its own way to the chaos is the 'smells' added to sights, sounds, and commotion. Notable for tourists are the smells of '*food*', '*spices*', '*incense*' and '*filth*'. The all-pervasive chaos is more sensationalized walking through streets lined with street food kiosks (that emanate strong smells of frying oil and various food items), spice markets and street vegetable vendors. The fragrance of 'incense' is difficult to escape as most people light incense sticks daily (a religious ritual / mark of obeisance to deities) in the plenty of places of worship, houses, transport vehicles, shops and even at places of work. While the soothing lighter scented smells are found aromatic and tempting, the pungent ones are sensed as odours. The quite common stench of filth comes from decaying garbage dumps, urination /open defecation, or else, at many places, overflowing faulty sewage drains and stagnant water on streets that is experienced as 'highly revolting' by tourists. Another common abominable observation by tourist is that in India '*choosing not to use a bathroom is not uncommon either*.'

In all this mayhem of sights, sounds, and smells, it is inexplicable to tourists, how life goes on 'undeterred' and 'unfazed', yet so calmly, without people losing their nerves. In essence what is reconciled to, is the fact 'what you cannot change, you accept', and the non-complaining acceptance of a chaotic life as the 'norm' holds the answer to a composed existence of the local population. Such composure widely visible on smiling faces is found unbelievably astounding to tourists who often ask: '*How do you manage*?' (living in the chaos). Indians perhaps philosophically realize that we (humans) cannot control everything, cannot make the universe revolve around us, but rather we have to become 'receivers/accepters', not 'controllers and managers'; hence, the only option is to change ourselves not worry, let go of oneself to smoothly go adrift and gel into the unavoidable chaos.

Regardless, the Indian chaos turns out to be the source of the undeniable lively energy experienced by tourists in the country. A remark rightly captures this energy pointing out to India as a '*Pulsating country where there is never a dull moment. Something is always happening*'. Each day some festival, some event, social and political gatherings, community meals, religious places humming with activity, temple bells ringing, regular five times calls of

the cleric for Muslim prayer, processions of deities, other congregations and streets always alive with hectic activity, 'all' form the heartbeat of India.

To sum up the chaos it is rightly pointed out by one tourist, '*India is an irony of a beautiful chaos.*' All this chaos is incomprehensible (Miglani, 2013) and has a profound effect on the tourists. An observation states '*The stunning thing about being in India, with all the noise, chaos and surprises, is that it all seemed so normal.*' Another surprised tourist notes '*People of all kinds, animals and machines, living in a kind of harmony seemingly not possible*'. For the experiential and open-minded receptive tourists, the manner in which life goes on harmoniously uninterrupted in the extreme chaos is perceived as a '*life changing*' experience. One has a lot to learn from India and this learning is acknowledged in the statement '*The Indian chaos inculcates patience and makes one humble*!'

Curries and Cuisines

Gastronomical delights of countries, regions and cultures are fast becoming a major draw for tourists (Fields, 2002; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Richards, 2002; Ryu and Jang, 2006). Gastronomical or culinary tourism provides multidimensional experiences in which consumption of food leads to sensory, cultural and social experiences (Andersson, Mossberg and Therkelsen, 2017). The rich Indian food spread is an adornment of spectacular sights of colourful dishes, all unique in taste, appealing to senses, savouring which culminates into a gastronomical experience (Hoegg and Alba, 2007).

The exoticism and variety of Indian cuisine can be encapsulated in a well familiar term '*Curry*'. Curry is one important identity of India. '*If it's Indian, its curry*!' Indeed, Indian curries are world famous. Meeting an Indian often piques the curiosity of foreigners with respect to conversations invariably taking a turn in the direction of 'Indian Curry'. Several people have inquired the author with fascination '*Oh, you are from India, so can you cook a curry*?' '*Can you cook an Indian curry for us*?' The word 'curry' was coined by the British while referring to 'Broths', but it has become largely associated with Indian food (Sengupta, 2017). Particularly in the United Kingdom, curry is a synonym for Indian food. Buettner (2008) observes that the expression 'going for India', or 'out for curry' is a prominent aspect of British culture, while Varman (2016) echoes the belief that Indian food is quintessential British Takeaway food.

Kivela and Crotts (2006) elaborate upon the cultural curiosities of culinary tourists, while Lee and Crompton (1992) suggest that food is an expression of culture. The extensive landmass of India, a composite of diversity of cultures, geographical regions, and religions, all contribute to making the country a rich gastronomical attraction for culinary tourists. With the increasing popularity of culinary tourism as a form of 'Alternative' Tourism (Fox, 2007; Kivela and Crotts, 2005; Long, 2004; Quan and Wang, 2004), India certainly has a competitive edge in her 'cuisine' as a tourism product. The country is home to a countless variety of herbs, oils, spices and food and beverage products. Indian spices have been world famous as a prized / desired commodity since the time of trade on the famous Silk Route. The Indian kitchen is popularly known for its lavish and 'slow cooking' (slow food), as opposed to Western 'fast food'. No wonder in Indian households the maximum time of the lady of the house (especially the home maker), is spent in the kitchen throughout, preparing about 'three' different meals daily i.e. (breakfast, lunch, and dinner). The migration and settlement of Indian diaspora in all parts of the world has been instrumental in promoting the varied Indian cuisine worldwide. Hence, most non-Indians are quite familiar with the famous Indian Mughalai, Punjabi and South Indian cuisine, among others.

Indian 'flat breads' (referred to as pancakes) viz. '*Roti*', '*Puri*', '*Paratha*', and '*Naan*', are other tempting delights. Watching the sight of the *Puri* inflate in hot oil, has often raised the naïve query from onlookers '*Don't they explode*?' Other food items like '*Samosa*', '*Gol Gappey*', '*Chaats*', '*Chutneys*' and colourful sweetmeats (*Mithai*) are popular food items readily available everywhere to entice both local and tourists.

Especially for Westerners, whose taste buds are acclimatized to rather bland food, the welcome change of 'spicy' food holds a special attraction. If, in the maiden attempt, the experimental first timer to Indian food can digest the oils, spices, sweet and richness of Indian dishes without falling sick, then it paves the way for slowly developing taste and taking fancy to the irresistible Indian dishes. However, for many tourists, Indian food though delicious, is difficult to eat, particularly '*with hands.*' Others find the scent of aromatic spices 'too strong' and uneasy to shy them away from Indian food.

Talking of her food experience, one tourist to India mentions '*My stomach does not feel too good. But the food is amazing. I wasn't surprised when I found out that I had gained 5 pounds in 2 weeks*.' Such a comment indicates how irresistible Indian food can be.

Colours, Customs and Confluence of Diversity

A striking observation made by foreign tourists is that '*India is very Colourful*' Tourists are pleasantly fascinated by the sight of every possible attractive vibrant colour present in the Indian environment, which is widely captured in thousands of photographs taken by them. For the predominantly Western tourists who come from places where monotonous Black, Grey and sober colours are the fashion statement, in India, the sight of fluorescent Reds, Oranges, Maroons, Greens, Yellows and Blues among a wide variety of others, are eye catching and refreshing. Colours are visible everywhere, in clothing, banners, posters, hoardings, shopping streets, buildings, houses, vehicles, décor outside temples, other religious places and celebration of fairs and festivals. Personal adornments like jewellery, *henna*, and the famous 'dot' (*Bindi*) on the forehead of women are also visible in colours aplenty. Besides, every State has its unique colourful attire, textiles, and art. Most (Hindu) religious saints too are seen with orange or white coloured stripes painted on their forehead i.e. *'tika'.* Hence the burst of colours in India is indeed captivating.

Tourists are also intrigued by several social norms / 'customs' observed in daily life of Indians. These include the surprising gender hierarchy (male domination), segregation of males and females in public places (like a separate queue for 'Ladies') religious and other gatherings with distinct separate 'male' and 'female' spaces and in the patriarchal society all decision making concentrated with the males. Another curiosity, i.e. the common custom of the lady of the house serving the guests and family before taking her meal and people comfortably seated cross legged on the 'floor' to eat food, are also found interesting to the foreign eye. One observation/ surprise for tourists is also the sight of a large number of 'commoners' and even 'Ministers' dressed in '*Pyjamas*' (i.e. *Kurta-Pyjama*) as daily attire, something considered as a 'night dress' in western cultures. On the other hand, the observation of Indians dressed formally, and people fully clad on beaches startles many, expressed as '*Oh there are so many people dressed in Saris along the beach*?' While the conservative Indian culture calls for being properly dressed, this cannot be understood by people for whom beaches are places meant for swimsuits/wetsuits for sunbathing and swimming.

The 'cultural diversity' of India enamours tourists. Heterogeneity of culture is indubitably a major attraction (Bacsi, 2017). Based upon Porter's model, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) suggest that culture is indeed a 'prime component' / 'core resource' of any destination's attractiveness.

India abounds in this core resource, i.e. 'culture' and is an epitome of cultural pluralism. '*This is a gigantic country, and it isn't just the landscapes that are so diverse - the people, cultures and languages are too*' (Ladyflashman, 2016). The exotic socio-cultural diversity of India is omnipresent on Indian land, where culture changes every few miles and this is visible in varied religions, languages, dialects, customs, cuisines, art and architecture. The reality of people of different socio-economic and religious backgrounds living together in harmony and brotherhood is an ideal example of confluence of diversity in the country.

Indian Collectivism and Social Institutions

The Asian culture is predominantly 'collectivist' as opposed to the Western 'individualistic' culture. In a collectivist culture 'We' in terms of family and society is more important than 'I' or 'Me', and 'belongingness' and group identify are regarded above the 'self' and individual existence (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1989).

Paramasivam and Nair-Venugopal (2012) posit that 'the general Western perception of Indians is that they are collective in nature; that they value collective identities especially of caste and family' (p. 157). Indian society is cohesive. In India, the whole family (grandparents, parents, and children, at times even extended family) prefers to live together under the same roof, unless any situation calls for otherwise. There are core values of loyalty and 'interdependence' of bonds. Grandchildren are often brought up by grandparents who spend their entire life, first bringing up their own children and then raising their grandchildren. Important family decisions are usually taken 'collectively' by the whole family, with considerable say of elders. Many times, even the decision of one's marriage, when to buy a house, or when it is time to have kids (and how many), is a collective decision influenced by family members (Raghavan, 2011). Extended families under a single roof provide comfort and a support system. As long as they are alive, parents remain available for their children and concerned for their welfare. Neither parents nor children can easily let go of each other. The 'ethic of care' and responsibility is largely manifest in the Indian family system. Hence in the traditional Indian set up, the family unit is usually bigger (i.e. joint). However, over the past few decades the nuclear family pattern is fast spreading its roots in India but remains primarily prevalent in cities and modern society.

Foreigners, particularly Westerners coming from Individualistic national cultures find such traits of a collective culture, inexplicable (Paramasivam and Nair-Venugopal, 2012). Usually in western society, at the age of 18, one is pronounced an 'adult' and thereon expected to decide his/her course of life, take financial and personal independence decisions, live independently, and find a life partner of own choice. Hence, 'how' and 'why' one's life decisions should be influenced / interfered in, by whole family or relatives, is rather incomprehensible for tourists.

The institution of 'arranged marriage' also stirs up curiosity among foreigners. While most modern, educated, and progressive families allow their children to choose a partner of their own, the practice of arranged marriages still carries on in traditional Indian social set up. This is beyond the understanding of tourists who often ask: '*How can you marry someone you have never met or seen*?' '*How can you marry someone you do not know*?' '*How can someone else choose a life partner for you*?' Such are some of the many intriguing queries of tourists. Though the roots of Indian society are firmly planted in collectivism, a trend towards individualism is fast on the rise on account of education, modernization, practicalities of life and influence of the West.

The Big Fat Indian Wedding

The Indian wedding is one unique wedding, famous around the globe for its scale, pomp, and show. What foreigners know about the Indian wedding is that it is a huge extravagant affair. The gaiety of the 'loud Indian wedding' is visible in colours, lots of Bollywood music, singing, dancing, bling, and lavish spreads of a wide variety of food for a continuous number of days. In Indian culture, the wedding is the most important event of one's life. Soon after the birth of a child, the family (rich or poor) starts saving for the child's marriage. A lifetime is spent building and saving assets for the wedding. Weddings also mean great expenditure as Indian weddings invariably have a 'huge guest list' and often involve a significant exchange of gifts between the bride and bridegroom's family along with hosting family and guests. Weddings are also an important occasion for displaying one's status in society. The usually large attendance in Indian weddings makes a wedding a 'public affair' with invitations to family, relatives, distant relatives, close friends and even mere acquaintances, quite unlike the western weddings that are restricted to close family and friends. Unlimited eating, drinking, dressing up in gold-laden jewellery, glitzy ornaments, several changes of party attire (each different for every ceremony) and lots of music and dancing to choreographed Bollywood songs carry on continuously, as long as festivities last till the 'Grand Wedding Day'. The increasing popularity of the Indian weddings is now evident in private weddings opening doors to welcome eager, yet complete strangers, for commercial purposes. This commercialization has originated under the banner 'Join My Wedding' i.e. ticketed wedding, in which any unknown interested foreigner/tourist is welcome to attend by paying a certain amount for a ticket/participation (fee) to experience the festivities, food and drink and even accommodation. To attract tourists for enjoying the flavour of Indian weddings, ticketed Indian weddings are becoming a lucrative business that provides the ideal opportunity to tourists for cultural immersion. Such grand weddings continue to remain a constant amazement for foreign tourists.

Contrasts and Other Curiosities

Reported by a tourist, India is a '*curious mix of contradictions*'. A fast developing but relatively poor country, India provides sights of striking contrasts that leave the tourists wondering with 'eyes wide open'. As stated, '*The contrast between rich and poor is so obvious, and you never really get used to it. On one side of the street you may see palatial apartments, while on the other side people live in makeshift houses on the sidewalks.*' One tourist arriving in India at the state-of-the-art glitzy International airport in Delhi is awestruck and asks the author, '*You have a carpeted airport that stretches for miles? Unbelievable!* Out from the luxurious airport, immediately follow completely contrasting sights, i.e. abject poverty seen alongside the rich and affluent; modern architecture and skyscrapers tower from amidst plenty of crumbling and ghetto like dilapidated structures; smooth silk roads, particularly in posh city areas, compete with potholed streets; disabled beggars knock at window panes of BMWs on street lights; sparkling Shopping Malls with neon lights advertising multinational brands command localities full of small shops / vendors selling knick-knacks, utilities and inexpensive items; and urban cities and flashy lifestyles exude exuberance skirted by filthy slums areas in the periphery. In the contrasts is also the image and reality of 'heat and dust', countered by the opposite of breath-taking and mesmerizing natural beauty of glistening beaches, azure blue mountain skies and unpolluted pristine wilderness abounding in the vast sub-continent. Such contrasts leave the tourists speechless.

Several other astonishments are expressed by tourists. These are apparent in comments like '*Indians have so many temples in the house*' (i.e. deities placed in nooks and corners in rooms, on shelves, tables, refrigerators etc. for worship); '*How does an aged old sick family member*

mange to rest/sleep in the same room where TV is blasting and all children noisily dancing around? (where is one's own space/room, how are people so accommodating?); Why are there plant guards around plants?' 'You have monkeys and animals roaming in the open?' (they are meant to be in the Zoo); 'Why are so many people seen washing clothes by roadside/ riverside and then leave them to dry on roadside railings by the dirt and dust again? Tourists also notice 'There is music and songs blaring everywhere'. All these observations are fascinating and turn into innocent queries. However, the very things that tourists find highly 'unusual' are a part of the usual way of life of locals.

India turns out to be a photographer's delight. The incomprehensible curiosities are captured in a treasure of interesting photographic collection of images of India that are taken back with tourists to show to friends and family. These photos are also shared on blogs, social media pages, travel accounts and even discussed with connections made with people of the visited country, in order to understand and make sense of images captured. Indeed, tourist photography captures the essence of the place and makes a narrative of it (Albers and James, 1988; Chalfen, 1979; Crang, 1997; Gillespie, 2006; Scarles, 2012; Teymour, 1993; Urry and Larsen, 2011). To a large extent these photos mirror the reality of life (Sontag 1979). They also help to reinforce or counter country stereotypes. The content of the wide nature of photographs posted on Gettyimages.in by tourists who have visited India, showcases the county's culture and curiosities through photos of local people in different moods and expressions, street scenes, poverty, crowded chaotic streets, monuments, cows, elephants, colourful festivals (Holi in particular), festivities, Indian food, clothing, spice markets, shops, saints (sadhus), skyscrapers, slums, life in urban and rural areas and surprisingly smiling, composed and content faces amidst maddening chaos.

While tourists come to capture photographs, it comes as a surprise to many of them that in India they find eager locals wanting to click their photos with (western) tourists. Giving an account of such an observation, Viola (2019) writes 'I found it quite amusing that while we were touring the Taj Mahal, so many Indian families came up to me and wanted selfies. Why me? I'm the tourist, not the attraction here?'

Hence, in many ways India continues to remain an enchanting land of endless curiosities and bewilderment for foreign tourists.

Cultural Shock, Surprises and Charms of India

It is quite common for first time foreign tourists to experience a degree of 'cultural shock' in India. Cultural shock results when one is confronted with an unfamiliar environment, i.e. a different behavior, way of life, rules and social norms and even physical environment that is often intimidating (as it is quite opposite to what one is familiar with). Cultural shock can be a composite of unpleasant or negative experience, unexpected and inexplicable cultural differences and encounters of a different lifestyle that may lead to confusion, helplessness, fear, anxiety and irritation that disturbs both the body and mind (Furnham, 1984; Lee and Gretzel, 2016; Oberg, 1960; Reisinger and Turner, 2003). Cultural differences become apparent gradually as tourists start immersing in the destination.

For tourists, the strongest culture shock in India comes from the sight of 'crowding'/ sea of population combined with 'traffic'. This is rightly captured in the words of a tourist who reports 'If there is anything that will give you culture shock, it will be the Indian traffic!' However, Asian, and non-Asian tourists perceive and experience crowding differently. The shock in India is felt more by non-Asian tourists and the ones coming from lesser populated countries. 'Trash' is reported as another cultural shock by tourists. Heaps of garbage strewn all around/ stacked

along the streets and railway tracks are definitely an eyesore. 'Cultural conservatism' is another bolt resulting in anxiety. The larger Indian society is perceived by western tourists as rather 'orthodox' which results in uneasiness for tourists, especially when they realize that they are required to behave and dress 'appropriately' in the Indian environment. Another weird culture shock experienced by tourists is the 'reverse gaze'. Particularly, the white skinned tourists are surprised to find themselves 'gazed at' as they invariably become the 'attraction' for local population. Many are disturbed when '*stared upon*', in a country and culture where in the words of a tourist, '*staring is not regarded as rude.*'

Such, among several other encounters of cultural shock can only be minimized for tourists if they come well informed about the country and are prepared to absorb the shock than being shaken by it. A tourist rightly puts it '*Although the culture shock is not pleasant at first, I think overcoming it is part of the exciting travel experiences in India.*' Normally the culture shock is pushed back into the subconscious when the country slowly starts unwrapping the gift of her never-ending beautiful experiences, acknowledged, and appreciated by a tourist in the words, '*the culture shock is huge, but so are the rewards.*'

Leaving aside culture shock, there are innumerable 'cultural pleasantries' experienced by foreign tourist in India. Tourists find Indian people 'very welcoming', charming and gracious in their warmth and hospitality towards guests/strangers. The observation is that Indians are amiable and '*love to talk and interact with visitors*'. '*Indians are warm-hearted and curious. They will frequently go out of their way to befriend and help foreigner*s' (Cook, 2019). Though this friendliness is welcomed, some tourists are taken back when the very friendliness often becomes rather intruding. As mentioned in a comment, Indians '*ask a lot of questions about you*', which tourists may find uncomfortable and an unwelcome invasion into their privacy.

It is also appreciated by tourists that Indians '*love to help*'. A tourist from United States mentions in his travel account '*Indians love to help without payment or thanks. A total stranger picked up our luggage and put it on a train without staying around for any sort of payment or thanks.*' The Indian 'generosity' and 'hospitality' is acknowledged by tourists. In India, '*Guest is like God*' and given a lot of importance. The guest does not always have to be a known person and hence doors are always open for welcoming strangers as well. An instance of this can be confirmed in the remark of an Australian tourist who says '*even though they did not speak English they invited me into their house and offered me food and soft drink. I don't think many Australians would invite them inside*'. As discovered by foreign tourists, though India is a tough county, one can smoothly sail through it with helpful and friendly locals.

The shock and pleasure of the country can be encapsulated in a vivid account of a traveller who explains, that with India one experiences a '*Topsy turvy love relationship. One minute we will love India, the next minute we can't stand it. That's not the case for every tourist, but it's definitely common. That's because it's such a diverse country where different circumstances arise each day. One moment we'll be angry that someone tried to charge us double for something, while the next moment we'll be overwhelmed with love when a stranger invites us to their daughter's wedding. These situations really do happen in India. And it's this contrast of situations that can leave us with an imbalanced perception of the country.*'

Travelling to India, once is not enough. There is so much to see and experience, that a tourist is left yearning for more '*India ignited in me a passion for travel. But that passion took time to grow. At least for me it did.*' (Mckinney, n.d.)

Conclusion

Chandra (2014) notes, that India has a deep impact especially on western travellers. This impact is a resultant of the combined chaos, commotion, contrasts, extremely hospitable people and unexpected and never-ending surprises. As soon as a tourist lands in India, the Indian experience encompasses him/her, like the omnipresent air one breathes. There is no separating glass barrier to disconnect oneself and gaze at the destination as a distant spectator. India provides a physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially engaging experience. The many ways in which this experience is received and perceived, is described by tourist in words like '*stressful*', '*eye opening*', '*humbling*', '*enchanting*', '*overwhelming*', '*life changing*', and '*soul stirring*'. A Thai tourist says, 'I *really enjoyed India and seeing something different from my normal life makes me see life differently*'. One tourist from U.S. reports his travels in India saying, '*it is absolutely exhausting, but I never felt so alive, as I did while visiting India. There is just so much. India will teach you patience, to go with the flow.*' A remark by Viola (2019) substantiates the intensity of the Indian travel experience in the words '*If you want to be transformed, go to India. With its rich history, spiritual practices, colourful festivals, stunning architecture and landscapes, India is truly an incredible country you have to see at least once in your lifetime.*'

This study confirms that India provides an interesting kaleidoscope of experiences (both positive and negative) to tourists. The country is found as 'unique', 'challenging', 'enlightening' and capable of delivering an 'unparalleled and profoundly rich experience' (Khan, 2013). The Indian experiential dimension can be summed up in several comments by tourists like '*It is so much more than the stereotypes*', '*India's a great country for building (and testing) patience.*' '*It teaches you to become 'courageous' and capable of 'overcoming hurdles.*' One tourist writes '*India in all its senses is addictive. The options are limitless, and it will be super hard to decide, since each one is better than the other. People continue to be fascinated.*'

With these insights into tourist experiences of India, the paper concludes that despite all its pandemonium, India offers an eccentric and distinct experience that no other country can offer. A post on India by a tourist points out*, 'By surrendering and embracing the chaos we learn to keep moving forward in life and not give up, no matter what the circumstances are, India teaches us to stop trying to control everything, over analyse everything that happened in the past or worry about the future because life is unpredictable anyway* (Dussaix, n.d). Indeed the rather challenging yet captivating country is for the 'brave hearted' and 'open minded' tourist who is ready to embrace the country's offerings with open arms and take back a 'life changing experience' that transforms a person to become calm, patient, humble and accommodating in the maddening web of life. From one international tourist the advice is '*Approach it with patience, good humour, open mind, friendly but firm manner.*' Through a British Broadcasting Corporation travel story by Wiener (2015) it can be appropriately concluded '*The fact is, India is hard, and it is this hardness that offers its appeal (two ideas, of course, that don't typically go together). But if the point of travel is to challenge ourselves – to discover a "new way of seeing", as Henry Miller put it – then naturally we should seek out the most "difficult" destinations, like India, not in order to change them but, rather, to change ourselves.*'

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