

Interpreting India, Identity, and Media From the Field: Exploring the Communicative Nature of the Exotic Other

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This study explores the process of interpreting interviews and media collected during two visits to India. Looking at the communicative nature of Indian identity, the author takes into account his own identity as an American exposed to a lifetime of exotic representations of Indian culture. Recognizing the limits of time for study in the field, recorded media provide valuable evidence and open discursive avenues to greater understandings of our world. As a discursive space, the camera's gaze focuses attention back to the ontological conditions of the researchers' experiences as a forum for the negotiation of values and beliefs. Evidence of the process of communication provides a better understanding of the construction of meaning and identity. Thus, the mediated data, reconsidered later, recall the eidetic essence of existential knowledge supporting the process of ethnographic writing.

Keywords: *semiotic; India; identity; exotic Other; representation*

EXPLORING THE EXOTIC OTHER

The purpose of this study is to explore the communicative nature of an exotic Other and to develop an understanding of media used for recording experience in the field to be analyzed later at home. As an American documenting my experiences in India, the concept of the Other refers to how I distinguish my Self from the people and culture of India. The signs that distinguish the *exotic* Other are the exciting and unusual qualities that express my preconceptions of India in opposition to those signs assumed to be normal to me as an American. What I experience interacting with others is a reaction that happens when I recognize myself as different. Characteristics of the people and atmosphere of India illuminate the distinctions that establish and maintain my "semiotic self" (Sebeok, 2000, p. 91). Although I cannot truly know the Other, I can recognize the qualities of signs that communicate distinctions by which I identify the Other and know my Self. Considering this, I

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must acknowledge my sense of identity and preconceptions about the nature of Indian culture.

Because of the brevity of my time in India and the simple fact that I was easily identified as an outsider, I could not enter the stream of everyday life within the culture. Under these conditions, I explored culture and identity and recorded my experiences and interviews to be analyzed later.

This study emerged through a series of communicative processes—planning in anticipation of going to India, the experience of *being* there, recording and later interpreting the video and other data, and finally, the move to express in words a narrative, reflexive description of my experiences. Writing is an interpretive act moving the traces of experience through a process of representing knowledge in words that began as experience. Writing our experiences is a way to connect the personal with the social world and the actuality of living and to reconstruct identity through a literature of social science (Ellis, 1997, p. 117). As I write about my experiences in India, I reflexively consider the phenomenology of my experience. With my identity as the background, I inscribe the semiotics of the exotic Other.

Discovering identity is a continuous communicative cycle between expression, perception, and interpretation—the continuum between human consciousness and the signifying capacity of the world of intelligible things. Interpreting the communicative nature of the *exotic* Other involves a continuous process through individual and community perspectives that optimistically reaches a consensus of an idea of truth (Nöth, 2001, p. 247). However, Nöth (2001) cautioned that

our image of the other is indeed a construction of our own self. The frame of reference of this construction is not the “real” other, a presumably existing reality which we only have to reveal, but the immense web of cultural intertextualities which comprises not only our discourse about the others, but also the others’ discourse about their cultural self. (pp. 247-248)

Understanding the Other is based on a self-referential, socially negotiated process. The *exotic* is a socially constructed category of difference with aesthetic appeal. The exotic attracts and repels simultaneously because of the very nature of *otherness*. The distinctions that signify the Other are grounded in perspective, but the essential nature of anything is unaltered by its practical meaning to someone else. As such, to find clarity in perspective, one must *bracket* assumptions situated from a given point of view.

Bracketing is the process of acknowledging the influence of perspective. The process observes how signs fulfill their purposes of referring to the meanings of things based on the perspectives and identity of an interpreter. The method of bracketing assumes an awareness of certain distinctions and perspectives that can be taken *out of consideration* to help locate the essential qualities of a phenomenon. It is like taking the water out of the sea to examine the

salt. Bracketing accounts for the context and limits of interpretation so description can reveal the essential nature of what remains.

The world of the Self is understood through levels of distinctions in relation to one's conscious identity within a larger culture. *Culture* encompasses the values and meanings produced in a given society by various phenomena and experiences (Fiske, 1987, p. 254). Our stories are an expression of our identity and culture and the way we share what we learn.

The narration of my story speaks of my experience in India and about the media collected in the field. The media represent traces of my embodied experience. The events and conditions of my experience were documented in journals, audio recordings, photos, and video recordings of day-to-day events. Photos, audio, and video provide eidetic evidence, recalling existential knowledge and supporting ethnographic description and interpretation.

The context of my lived experience in India was anticipated by years of media exposure. Images of the *exotic* had accumulated so that I believed that I was well informed about what I would find in India. Still, travel is a series of events that are open to every possible element of chance.

The certainty of ideas is not the foundation of the certainty of perception but is, rather, based on it—in that it is perceptual experience that gives us passage from one moment to the next and, thus, realizes the unity of time. In this sense all consciousness is perceptual, even our consciousness of ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 13).

My actual experiences of India can be understood only by bracketing my preconceived ideas about India. Thus, my interpretation is negotiated through analysis of perception and experience.

Everyone takes up a *local* perspective, and the Indians I met during my visit often enjoyed giving voice to their point of view. Listening to others speak from within the culture of India provided context, history, and insight, creating subtle understandings of details that were not apparent to me before they were illuminated through explanation. Making the invisible visible, my project “studies the culturally shared common sense perceptions of everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 177-178). Like Lanigan (1992), Nelson (1989, p. 224), and Ford-Ahmed (1999, pp. 74-75), I explore lived experiences negotiated between my own observations as they occurred and the cultural realities expressed by others.

Just as my preconceptions were formed from romantic media representations, I was exotic to Indians who had mostly known Americans through media cowboys, gangsters, and affluent urbanites. According to Anderson and Jack (1991), learning to listen to coresearchers suggests that “analysis should be suspended or at least subordinated to the process of listening” (p. 15). Recorded interviews and observations were collected so they could be analyzed much later. Recognizing a lifetime of acquired preconceptions of an exotic Indian culture conveyed to me through exposure to Western media, I self-reflexively bracket my own desires for fulfillment of fantasies about

India. This is central not only to identifying myself as the Other in India but also to describing the unifying characteristics of Indian culture. Before the archive media are analyzed, my own perspectives need to be placed within the context of my life and the media through which India was represented.

SEMIOTIC CONTEXT OF SELF AND THE OTHER

Who am I that *explores* India? My perspective limits the context of my interpretation of the Other. According to Peirce (1998),

When it happens that a new belief comes to one consciously generated from a previous belief—an event which can only occur in consequence of some third belief (stored away in some dark closet of the mind, as a habit of thought) being in a suitable relation to that second one—I call the event inference or reasoning. (p. 463)

Signs always refer to other signs, and meaning grows as a semiotic process. In this case, the exotic Other exists within the cognitive frame of my embodied cultural preconceptions. Meaning becomes myth as history is taken for nature (Barthes, 1972). That is, the way something is interpreted at some time and place is understood as natural, yet meaningfulness is always affected by the context of perception. What *was* understood may be thought the correct way the phenomenon *ought* to be understood. Media narratives construct an exotic India where people dress, speak, and act in ways distinctly different from yet appealing to certain Western values and beliefs. Oversimplified to emphasize cultural characteristics no less romantic than tales about cowboys and Indians, or tough-guy detectives, these stories (from the point of view of the Western male explorer, colonizer, or spiritual seeker) presume to represent a particular historical perspective as the nature of all India. Such myths present an appeal to reconstruct the identity of the interpreting subject. The following descriptions constitute my early experiences of representations of India.

When I was a kid in the 1950s, I watched a Saturday morning television show hosted by Andy Devine called *Andy's Gang*. The program was filmed in a darkened theater with a cheering adolescent audience. Froggy the Gremlin and Midnight the Cat performed curious skits on stage with Andy, and a series of films featured the adventures of a teenage boy in colonial India. The young hero, in turban and loincloth, carried on daring exploits with elephants for transportation and wild tigers threatening to emerge from primeval jungles.

When I was in high school, I read literature such as *Siddhartha* and *Damien* by Hermann Hesse. These novels explore identity and spirituality through a distinctly Eastern point of view. The writings and media images of Mahatma Gandhi profoundly affected my ideas about intelligence and the meanings of

heroism and integrity. When I was in college, Eastern philosophies emerged, such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism, with stories of Yogis, Zen masters, and Hindu mystics. The Beatles' George Harrison in particular introduced music and spiritual images of India. Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), and Aldous Huxley popularized literature such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Upanishads. These texts consistently represent Eastern philosophies, emphasizing the spiritual connections between people and events in opposition to Western materialism and individualism. Thirty years later, I packed my fascination, preconceptions, and stereotypes to visit India.

I made two journeys to India during consecutive 6-week (extended) winter breaks in the academic calendar, from December 1997 to mid-January 1998 and December 1998 to mid-January 1999. The first trip, I traveled alone with a cassette recorder and 35mm camera to northern India. My sojourn included interviews and a presentation on semiotics and communication for a major advertising agency in New Delhi, visits to significant tourist attractions, and living for 2 weeks in a small remote village in the Himalayan foothills. The second trip was as a member of an interdisciplinary research team touring southern India. During that visit, I carried a small digital video camcorder and recorded interviews and sights representing a broad range of people, events, and geographic locations in southern India. Together, these two excursions into the field provided the rich data for this study.

GATHERING MEDIATED ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

During my two journeys to India, the collected media became central to my study. Each photo and video sequence mediates the context of my experience and the phenomena it represents. I intended to use media "to create texts that are interpretive rather than simply evocative, while sensitizing themselves to the negative potential of the objectification and exoticization of the other" (Murphy, 1999, p. 480). Although some aspects of analyses of photos, interviews, and videotape can be objective, my corporeal and relational knowledge of shared experience documented in journals and interviews allowed me to focus on issues of power and identity embodied in the text.

On returning from India in 1999, I reviewed more than 40 hours of videotape. My immediate intent was to extract scenes to construct a short narrative that would give a visual sense of my experience while providing interpretations informed by self-reflection, scholarly literature, and interviews. As part of a research team that was predominately interested in exploring the Indian middle class for potential business relationships, I was primarily interested in what was distinctly Indian culture. A revealing part of the video demonstrates the stark contrast between the settings for interviews with business and government people in relatively modern, comfortable environments and

the crowds, filth, poverty, and ancient architecture that attracted my attention outside. In addition, I was attracted to pristine landscapes and people working at their everyday tasks. Women in a line carrying brush on their heads; men wading in a lake gathering lotus flowers, washing clothes in the river, or making pottery at the side of the road; bicycles with men carrying huge bales of raw silk; fisherman hauling in nets; and especially the religious old men were the picturesque images that satisfied my romantic fantasy of India. The native people of means, including my Indian colleague, diverted their attention away from the streets to privilege the new, the modern, and the high-tech comforts of contemporary life and luxury available to those with money.

The observable distinctions between rich and poor helped to identify the essence of the unifying characteristics of India. That is, in experiencing binary oppositions such as old and new architecture, rich and poor people, modern and traditional life, an ethos of shared beliefs and practices emerged. By shifting the figure/ground relationships, semiotic phenomenology focuses on describing phenomena, bracketing observable differences, and seeking the essential qualities to arrive at a final interpretation. Each new context of my experiences in India expressed new levels of distinctions.

The people whom I spoke with in India tended to express aspects of their culture in ways similar to how Americans generalize about regional, ethnic, and racial characteristics of people in the United States. People that spoke English were often from comfortable homes and were well educated; in many cases they had studied in Europe or the United States. Occasionally I met people, such as rickshaw drivers, hotel workers, and beggars or prostitutes that approached me on the street, that had learned English on their own. People were clear and precise about seemingly endless distinctions of language, religion, caste, ethnicity, and historical awareness of domination from foreign invaders. Not vested in conditions of life on the subcontinent, I had to bracket my own romantic notions about the structures of society in contemporary postcolonial India. The appeal of my romantic preconceptions from literature and popular culture had not anticipated the intense impact of the overpopulation and poverty in urban areas. My presence was a sign of wealth to those people who provided services or begged on the street. Children who did not speak English called out "money, money, money" and repeated a hand-to-mouth gesture when they saw me on the street.

My travel itinerary was based on a rigorous tour of southern India that targeted key areas of economic development. The principle hypothesis of my colleagues who were interested in business and economics was that there is an enormous potential market for American goods and services among a growing Indian middle class. The task, then, was to define and locate the Indian middle class and pursue potential opportunities to establish business relationships.

Most of my opportunities to meet people and pursue relationships were with individuals such as service providers, shopkeepers, drivers, tour

guides, hotel staff, and most significant, people I met on daily walking excursions. At the same time, my colleagues arranged formal interviews with business owners, CEOs, and various government officials connected to commerce and development. I recorded my personal adventures and my colleagues asking questions about business, proposing research-oriented solutions to problems, or suggesting possible arrangements to initiate a mutually beneficial business relationship. Thus, my recordings document some diverse class and institutional interests.

INTERVIEWS

I took advantage of access to government officials and business people by asking a variety of questions when they seemed appropriate, such as Are you married? Do you have children? What religious traditions do you observe? What do you do after work? What do you do for fun? What do you watch on TV? Although I intended to be bold and intrusive, I tried to avoid impropriety by always requesting permission before asking questions of a personal nature. These questions sometimes appeared to violate social protocols that shocked and offended one of my colleagues who also happened to be Indian. Most people were very honest about whether they were comfortable speaking to me in this way. Some people appeared to be uncomfortable, but only once was I told that I should not ask. Most people were very intrigued with these conversations and unhesitatingly volunteered a great deal of personal insight. Many universal themes were revealed suggesting the impact of mass media on family life. Parents objected to changes in fashion, conventional behaviors, and traditions that were attributed to the influence of Western film and American television. Traditional values and beliefs were reinforced by popular, regional programming produced in the local language and often based on traditional Hindu literature.

Although I was often able to conduct in-depth interviews, they were usually done on one occasion without establishing any real relationship or trust. On some occasions, I encountered an individual during the course of a week or more and could follow up with greater depth and insight after participants could reflect on earlier discussions. I was always aware that I was generally limited to educated, English speaking persons. I did, however, manage several remarkable relationships and experiences not based on speech or a mutual language.

One of the most interesting nonlinguistic encounters was with a man named Than Singh. For 2 weeks during my first trip, I was based outside the city of Almora in a mountain village in the Himalayan foothills near the borders of Tibet and Nepal. A fabulous view of the valley was dotted with the blue and white stone houses and white-capped Himalayas in the distance. Than Singh's house was just 50 yards from where I was staying in the steep

mountainside village of Ayarpani. He spoke only Hindi and I only English, but he told me about his life and experience in the military. We sat in the glow of a small fire and the light of one candle. He showed me a long scar on his belly and medals he received for service during wars with Pakistan. He told me of his early days as an athlete and career as a gym teacher—all pantomime! We sipped warm, sweet tea, and I felt surprisingly comfortable during occasional long silences. His final statement after we sat for hours was as follows: He slowly pointed to me then to himself. Then he gestured to the sky with his face up and both hands up and open. Then he looked at me and held up one finger. Finally he put his hands together and bowed his head in a classic Hindu way. I took him to mean, "You and I are one with god." My host, British artist and writer Jonathan Evans, reflected that he knew Than Singh 2 years before he spoke of his personal life.

Jonathan's house, near Almora in northeastern India, was a 45-minute ride on a motor scooter to a phone station at a chai shop. The chai or tea shop was a place to congregate not only for tea or the phone but also because it had the only electric power in the village and, therefore, was the location of a television with a satellite connection. The chai shop television was most often tuned in to India's music television channel. India has its own MTV that features music videos from popular films made by India's huge film industry. When I joined the others watching, I was an obvious curiosity, but no one spoke to me. And in contrast to the cities, I was never accosted for money.

Than Singh's family drama was all too visible and became apparent with time. I regularly sat on the flat rooftop of my residence to meditate at sunrise and watch the sunset in the evening. Buffalo, cows, and goats lived on the lower level of the Singh home. The women gathered food and bedding for the stock and firewood from the hillside. The surrounding areas were well manicured from many people and livestock harvesting food and fuel. Than Singh's daughter-in-law was lowest on the pecking order and did most of the necessary work. Meanwhile, Than Singh's wife pampered her grandson.

Than Singh was retired and apparently had an occasional problem with drinking. I asked permission to take his picture. We had a good rapport and some brilliant exchanges, so I thought he would simply agree. Although he did say yes, it took 3 days before he invited me to actually shoot the portrait. That day I had seen him bath, shave, and groom outside his house in the cold morning air. He was dressed up, wore his medals, and granted me just two snaps with a careful pose in front of his house—one with his grandson and one alone.

I was initially apprehensive about the intrusive nature of the camera. I learned with time that some people would clearly communicate objections or restrictions. Others ignored the camera in a way that led me to feel that it did not intrude on their personal space. Individual notions of privacy greatly vary in India. It is not uncommon for homes to have entranceways without doors. Visiting in someone's home, I walked past a bedroom with someone

sleeping—there was no door. Two young men from a college in Madras talked about village life. I interviewed them for several days, and they said it was not unusual, or objectionable, for someone to just walk into a neighbor's vacant home to borrow something.

Eventually a thematic emerged from the collective interviews and experiences. A *thematic* represents "knowledge and its logic, rhetoric, and tropic applications, especially as Ethnography" (Lanigan, 1992, p. 223). The principle thematic here addresses the essential characteristics of Indian culture. The answers lay in philosophies of time and space, a spiritual cosmology including beliefs in karma and reincarnation represented in styles of music, food, clothing, ritual practices, and everyday living.

Visible signs clearly distinguish major ethnic and cultural groups from each other. Western codes of style and appearance made me easily recognized as distinct from signs of India. But how can the essential qualities of being Indian be described with the many subtle distinctions between the different Indian groups? Historically, India is much more diverse than the geographic area that now constitutes a nation. Before British rule, some 500 years ago, the subcontinent was a collection of independent states (Singh, 1996). The many languages, dialects, religions, and ethnicities composed many historically distinct regional cultures. I hoped to learn something about the contemporary culture and make sense of my own preconceptions regarding India's spirituality, history, and culture. I was also interested in the use and impact of media on contemporary life. No small task considering limitations of time and access.

A PERSPECTIVE FOR READING THE OTHER

Considering the prospect of touring southern India during December 1998 and January 1999 to explore the culture through video, I was concerned about the intrusive nature of the medium. Although I always intended to be sensitive to personal space and ask permission when possible, in most situations I learned to shoot first and ask questions later—undoubtedly an aggressive American ethos.

Having traveled through parts of northern India the preceding year, I was aware that I was the Other in India. There were very few Western travelers and I stood out wherever I went. Many relationships in my travels were contractual—taxi driver/passenger, waiter/diner, guide/tourist—but there was mutual curiosity and recognition of the human condition. The traditional greeting in India, *namaste*, was translated for me to mean "I honor the spirit within you." I came to recognize this greeting as a manifestation of Indian culture that conformed to my preconceptions. In the more modern, high-tech environs of Delhi, Bombay, and Bangalore, however, this greeting was less common than in more remote locations. On a certain level, the traditional

greeting acknowledged a spiritual *oneness* and, thus, attempted to address the shared conditions of humanity.

I carried a digital palmcorder that is smaller than a paperback novel. It easily fit upside down in a fanny pack that I could draw like a gun from a holster—a regular video cowboy ready to shoot the exotic image before a moment could escape into the thick cover of a cultural forest. Considering my interviews and personal experience in the field, the following sections situate my identity and narrate my embodied experience interpreted through my video journal of southern India.

NARRATING THE OTHER

Unfamiliar objects or sounds are interpreted through preexisting knowledge that is “perceived as normal” (Lanigan, 1992, p. 34). What does a Western observer think about seeing a young woman who awakens at 7 a.m. after sleeping the night on a Bombay sidewalk and folds a thin bedspread neatly and stuffs it into an old plastic bag? Of course, a similar scenario could take place in any city in America, but *I* was in India. The woman was dressed in a beautiful, brightly colored Sari. She kissed the bedspread in a ritual gesture before stuffing it into the plastic bag. I do not know if she lived there or if camping on the street was a necessary inconvenience for the night. I saw only the immediate spectacle, observing from the comfortable vantage of my 3-star hotel. The video tells a story based on my real-life experience, but care must be taken not to assume a literal truth to its representation (Nichols, 1991, p. 128). My experiences were recorded in the field, but meaning is related to the context of interpretation.

A street vender makes a sale and then touches each of his wares and repeatedly kisses the money in a series of ritual gestures. He seems to experience a profound spiritual connection to what seems to me to be a relatively insignificant business transaction. An elephant suddenly appears in my path along a crowded city street. After recovering from the sheer novelty, I become aware that the chance encountering of the spectacle obligates me to pay for the experience. The elephant, face in my windshield, foot on the car bumper, blocked the car until I gave rupees to the elephant driver’s assistant. Such events are floating signifiers where meaning is not fixed but instead, a product of preconceived beliefs about the world. I felt that I had to pay because I was objectified as an outsider.

Through repeated viewing of videotapes, subtle meanings emerged that were not immediately apparent during the experience. While I was shooting an image of a huge film billboard through the window of a car stopped in traffic, a woman with no fingers walked into the frame and knocked on the window, holding a bucket on her arm and gesturing to her mouth. Using slow-motion playback, an expression of disdain became apparent as the woman

turned to walk away after I had given her some small change. I learned that as a non-Indian, some people considered me, with disdain, as lower than the lowest caste of Indian society.

A child came to the window of my car to beg and in the playback, I noticed other children in the background pointing and laughing at him. Another striking opposition was the appearance of a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman walking through heavy traffic past an older, one-legged man begging on a corner. Again, although the images appear so powerful, the meaning is not fixed and is primarily expressed by the opposition. The memory of the experience is more about a sense of the traffic and tumult than the details revealed in the playback.

ANALYSIS OF INDIAN CULTURE

There is no simple way to describe my experience of Indian culture. From my American perspective, India is an intense collage of color and sound, smells, tastes, and diverse people endowed with a remarkably rich and complex history. India epitomizes the postmodern dilemma. The oldest traditions, religious customs, architecture, and cultural influences of centuries of invasion and colonization all thrive in a complex mix with the latest in art, technology, and contemporary philosophy.

Communication is grounded on cultural convention, so the interpretation of signs is necessarily based on, but not limited to, the culture and experience of the interpreter. Meaning is created through the interpretation of experience and always emerges from difference. Differences between my preconceptions and what I actually saw in India were easy to perceive, but their meanings are subtle and richer than they might appear. India is a place of startling contradictions. Ancient traditions thrive beside the latest advances in new technology. The beauty of antiquated architecture looms over the poverty and decaying squalor of crowded cities, suffering, and pollution. Beside the contrasts of old and new, rich and poor, the culture is infused with spiritual sensibilities. According to Quentin Crewe (1998),

India is an atmosphere, a state of mind rather than a place. No two bits are the same, so its no good saying India is hot or India is cold, or India is violent or India is peaceful, because any statement will be true about somewhere in India at any given moment. (p. 4)

My own sense of *otherness*, in contrast to what is normal for me, heightened my awareness that signs of India are coded in the everyday practices of the people, expressed in a style, and understood through their history.

One of the striking characteristics of India is the pervasive expression of religious identity. Many people affiliated with the diversity of religious groups know the myths and practices that distinguish each other's belief sys-

tems. They recognize each other through clothing, history, rituals, and practices. As an American visitor, they all appear exotic and very Indian. Only gradually and with focused attention was I able to get a sense of cultural distinctions such as the sound of (southern) Carnatic and (northern) Hindustani music, the tastes of regional foods, or local myths and customs. Clothing and fashion vary regionally so that meaning is embedded in style. Each religious group ascribes to a specific knowledge of a literature and narratives. Just as Christians have the Bible, Hindus have the Gita and Muslims have the Koran. Each has a distinct identity and specific practices, yet from a naive Western perspective, even Christians retain a distinctly Indian character. In Cochin for example, a life-size, dark-skinned statue of Mary in a Catholic church is dressed in a sari and stands in a lotus flower. Each group derives identity from shared knowledge of its text, history, and practices. But for all their diversity, in a global context, there is an essential character of Indian cultural identity.

The question of Indian culture offers no simple reply. Much that has been written, by Indians and visitors alike, dances around the issues of diversity, caste, class, region, and religion. But the character of India is complicated. Understanding begs for the light of experience—an illumination that lives in the essence of being there—the sights, smells, tastes, and most important, relations with and among the people in their everyday lives. The “man on the street” can no better answer what it means to be Indian than an American can accurately portray some unified vision of life for people in the United States. Just the same, with a characteristic side-to-side gesture of the neck, anyone that has spent time in India knows there is a distinctive culture embedded in the intensity of everyday life. Although there is no substitute for being there, what is best communicated to the uninitiated requires the imagery of thick, narrative description.

I am uncomfortably aware of my Western perceptions of India. Speaking of the era when the British East India Company first colonized India, Singh (1996) observed, “Travelers’ experiences are mediated by expectations of sights and customs that they consider unnatural and uncivilized” (p. 28). Singh suggested that travelers invent rather than represent India through narrative interpretation (p. 29). This implies that the process of narrating the Other is essentially defining the Self as normal and the Other as exotic. Within cultural studies, the historical conditions of postcolonial India demand sensitivity to the exotic appeal of India interpreted through preexisting understandings of the world. Through a claim of a “privileged epistemological position,” Singh noted that British colonialists could “claim new knowledge which they could then process and circulate via the intractable colonial binarisms: civilization and barbarism, tradition and modernity, Christianity and heathenism, among others” (p. 2). My project used binary oppositions *within* the culture of India to help describe conflicts between rich and poor, traditional ways and modern technologies in everyday life, and artistic grandeur and the noise and pollution that confound the senses. Still, I was always

sensitive to the poverty and the apparent lack of social responsibility for the suffering of others that was often overwhelming because of its visibility. Could it be that the same problems and inconsistencies exist in America but are normal to me or at least concealed better? In Hindu philosophy, the conditions of one's birth and individual suffering are believed to be a condition of reincarnation and a consequence of events from a past life.

Although everything in India appears exotic, so much seems familiar. British influence is pervasive in the mix of architecture and other cultural artifacts, such as the style of hotel services. English is spoken to some extent, and signs are in English in most urban areas. Yet beneath the surface, everything is strange and confusing, immersed in the visual impact of the colors and customs, the intense energy of the persistent traffic, and the constant sense of imminent events (Crewe, 1998, p. 4).

Historical anecdotes locate signs in a context that anchors meanings. For example, the Gateway of India is a stone arch monument that was erected to commemorate the 1911 visit of King George V and his wife, Queen Mary (Paz, 1995, p. 8). Situated at the dock in the Bay of Bombay, the Gateway arch looks Roman but was actually inspired by a 16th century Indian architectural style (Paz, 1995, p. 8). It sits in front of the huge Taj Mahal Hotel that appears distorted from the bay. Paz (1995) explained that the back of the hotel faces the sea and the front faces the city because the local builders misinterpreted the architect's plans sent from Paris. Paz suggested this was an intentional act of resistance against the British colonists (p. 8). Similarly, how much suffering and injustice has gone into the building of America by slaves and immigrant groups whose contributions remain obscured in spite of their sacrifice?

Outside the hotel, crowds of Indian tourists stand around the Gateway watching boats in the Bay while street buskers compete for attention and rupees. A man with a monkey named Michael Jackson asks if I want to see the monkey dance. Another sells peacock feathers, another picture postcards. The traffic is intense, with horns honking persistently while beggars and hustlers work the crowds for a few rupees. Inside the Taj Hotel, a cup of coffee costs more than some Indian families may spend all day. Outside, I feel the need to avoid the persistent demands for my attention and money, only to feel guilty later for not giving more.

Restaurants and hotels reflect the national overabundance of labor and the simplest requests may trigger a swarm of competition to perform a task. There is a pattern of time-consuming inefficiency and apparent ineptitude. A knock at my hotel room at noon announced my 8 a.m. wake-up call. People seemed friendly, but my presence signified wealth and many people approached me for money. If they were not begging, many persistently offered services I did not want. I was sometimes annoyed but also threatened. I do not identify myself as wealthy and having disposable money but clearly, that was how I was perceived.

I asked a government representative about women I had seen making gravel by the side of the road. They earned about Rs175 (approximately US\$4.35 at the time) for breaking a piece of granite weighing several tons into 3-inch gravel. The official commented that husbands usually had *real* jobs and the wife's work was "extra" money. He suggested that women would be home "doing nothing" if they were not making gravel and that this work is actually a great opportunity for income. I thought, "There's a big difference between doing nothing and breaking rock all day." I commonly saw women and children carrying heavy loads of cement and other construction materials. Construction workers everywhere climbed questionable scaffolding made of bamboo tied together with twine. My initial judgment about these conditions has been tempered by the realization that things were not too different in the United States just 70 years ago.

Inside my Bombay hotel, quiet, air-conditioned luxury accompanies a breakfast of assorted traditional Indian dishes. Outside amid the noise and pollution, the identical traditional foods are prepared for a fraction of the cost by vendors on the street. A McDonald's restaurant in Bombay is located in a beautiful old office building. Even in India, McDonald's demonstrates the notion of style over substance, promoting itself as a fun place to eat. Choices include a *McChicken*, *McBurger*, *McAloo Tikki Burger*, *Vegetable Burger*, and *Vegetable McNuggets*, but the menu clearly states that no beef or pork products are sold. A *McBurger* is made with mutton, which I was told is goat. Cows are still considered sacred in Hindu culture, and Muslims are forbidden to eat pork.

With painted horns and religious inscriptions on their faces, cows wander city streets, freely grazing on refuse. Eventually I came to realize they would return to owners that would milk and tend them. By asking questions, and with careful observation and time, meanings gradually emerged.

Review of these videotaped events generates a text and a story of my experiences. Nichols (1991) suggested that we recognize reality in fictional texts through metaphorical resemblances to real people, places, objects, and emotions, "but we interpret this world through evaluative procedures that also depend on assumptions and values applicable to the world in which we live" (p. 109). In this same sense, the videotapes create stories that do more than serve as a chronicle of significant events as they reify the exotic Other.

IMAGING THE EXOTIC

My attempts to document my experiences in India were affected by awareness of my exotic preconceptions and the postcolonial conditions of this ancient and complex land. The powerful intrusive nature of my cameras compelled me to seek permission before shooting until I understood that my concept of spatial privacy was not necessarily shared. Some people would play to the camera, whereas many people did not seem to notice me. Yet the quality of

much of the video—the random shots of sky, ground, buildings, and people picked up by the fleeting eye of the camera—reveals my own aversion to focusing my eyes and looking directly at the human spectacle surrounding me. I would walk through crowds, glancing but averting my eyes (and the camera) before the object of my gaze would return my look and, thus, engage the energy and intimacy initiated through direct eye contact. The intrusive power of video assumes a safe, anonymous vantage from a distance, but surveillance becomes uncomfortable when the viewer becomes the viewed. I felt guilty looking when people knew I was looking and I had not acquired expressed permission.

The camera is reductionist. That is, media images always represent the world selectively. Video, with sound synchronized to the image, retains realistic qualities of the original context, whereas it necessarily shifts the meanings of recorded sights and sounds in time and space. The object of video is its own context, robbing the life world to create a sense of verisimilitude by recontextualizing visual and aural iconicity. As Merleau-Ponty (1964) stated, “Matter is pregnant with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the ‘world’” (p. 12). Thus, our relationship with an object or event that produces meaning is necessarily grounded in abduction, hypothesizing or guessing based on what we already know.

The video that I construct is not the world it represents. It is not India but instead, my interpretation as an American, reconstituted to tell *my* story. The limits of cultural perception, what *you* hear and see, and the way *you* feel, and what you think about what you hear and see, is *your* reality, *your tele-vision*, not India’s reality. The data representing my experiences in India, words, sounds and images, and especially my video production, compress time in an attempt to simulate the intensity of my experience of being there.

In the complex, inconsistent context of the postmodern world, Gitlin (1999) asserted that

the rock-bottom value, the overriding principle of this global culture has to be the preservation of the *other*. The hallmark is coexistence: that in the preservation of the other is a condition for the preservation of the self; we are not *we* until they are *they*, for to whom else shall we speak, with whom else shall we think, if not those who are different from ourselves? (p. 216)

As a metaphor for the cultural life of India, a wild elephant in the forest illustrates the limits of human perception. Visiting a jungle wildlife refuge in southern India, I was amazed when these huge animals slowly walked behind a tree and were gone from sight in seconds. They could not have gone far, but they had suddenly disappeared. So focused on the massive elephants, the rich density of their environment can be overlooked while it conceals the huge animals within its silence. In a similar way, India remains hidden to the visitor focused on the exotic surface of Indian culture.

CONCLUSION: FIELD WORK AND MEDIA

Although long-term studies arguably provide a certain kind of validity by virtue of time spent in the field, qualitative analysis depends on the writing process to express the persuasive quality of the data. Most teaching scholars spend much more time developing their studies at the university setting than in the field. This study provides a discursive space for a better understanding of identity construction narrated through thick descriptions of my experience as an American in India. Recordings of experiences constitute a new context of what was encountered in the field. As discourse, my project focuses attention on the ontological conditions of experience and provides evidence of the processes of communication that construct meaning and identity. "The other is not transmitted to the self, it is only evoked or recalled within the self in a self-referential process" (Nöth, 2001, p. 243). Experience changes interpretation; what was once exotic is now familiar and accessible.

The consequence of inquiry is a shift in perception. Although I will never be Indian, India's exotic appeal has forever been changed for me. The communicative nature of the exotic Other, determined through the cultural identity of an interpreter, is overcome through familiarity. Recorded media, especially interviews on videotape that can be repeated again and again, allow interpretation with time. I gradually became accustomed to being with the recorded speaker as I listened to the same stories repeatedly. The culture was no longer exotic because the images and stories had become familiar. Repetition made me feel comfortable with the speaker, as if we were two people continuing a conversation. This is an illusion of intimacy with the speaker but a genuine familiarity with the discourse.

Culture and identity are built on stories that share the knowledge and understandings of experience. The stories and images of India that preceded my visits were mediated through narratives building the exotic differences from my own cultural experiences. After returning home, the media of my Indian experiences became my own stories. After being immersed in India, the exotic became familiar and incorporated into the continuum of my identity and cultural understandings.

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