'Incredible India': Revisiting the Location of Cultural Heritage in India - A Semiological Perspective And Beyond
Sudipto Paul

Department of Jorunalism & Mass Communication, Seth Anandram Jaipuria College,
University of Calcutta, India
CCIP Scholar, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Department of State, USA

Abstract

With the assertion of Lowenthal that 'suddenly, cultural heritage is everywhere', the common perception that exists about a cultural heritage site is deeply rooted in its touristic value and definitely a way to know the history, if not to participate in the process of learning-unlearning. Under such circumstances, this paper seeks to unravel the semiotic location of the cultural heritage sites in India. While the first part of the paper examines the 'Incredible India' as an attempt on the Indian counterpart to export itself rather than importing visitors, the next segment attempts to explore the semiotic location of a few cultural heritage sites that are recognized as popular. Further, the paper takes into account the politics of selection and the politics active in the selection of cultural heritage sites.

Key Words: Cultural Heritage, Semiotics, India, Incredible India.

The gaze, under the surveillance of which the cultural heritage sites perform and are read, shapes and reshapes the prevalent meta-narratives that attempt to offer a totalitarian account of the stories heard and the events experienced in a bid to legitimize various versions of the truth. With the huge number of tourists from home and abroad depending on the historical and mythological legacy in their quest to know more about what India inherits culturally, the cultural heritage sites are not only perceived as inherited locations that have been commoditized into destinations but also define (and redefine) the cultural memory as well as empower the audience with an empirical knowledge of transition from *hereness* to *thereness*, in the process of which the cultural heritage sites can never be said to be used any better than the time machine portrayed in the *Time Machine* by H.G.Wells. While identifying the imposition of semiotic limitation on the materially and visually framed cultural heritage sites, this paper seeks to trace the journey of the engulfed socio-cultural rituals and codes as signifier, if not anything more than that. It does so by examining the capacity of a few selected (popular) cultural heritage sites in India to carry the cultural significance and to become signs rather than participating in the process of sign-meaning. A further exploration of politicized cultural heritage selection is taken into account for the purpose of examining the success of that politics.

Is India Incredible?

The invitation to time-travel is explicit in nature though, at least in the Indian context, with the official slogan '*Incredible India*' exerting the value of *pastness*, difference, and exhibition – all brought under one roof for the purpose of assisting tourism and heritage to go together hand in hand. Incredible India (usually seen as Incredıble!ndıa), the nation branding campaign, came to existence right after the attack on the Indian Parliament in the year 2001 (and other international events like destruction of the World Trade Centre), and the Indian tourism industry was destined to take off to the land of economic growth. The branding of identities was perhaps successful enough in what it actually went out to do i.e. to place India in the global tourism market but the problem is elsewhere. With the consideration that a sign is what it is not, a sign can only be recognized by difference or dissimilarity that it possesses when compared to other co-present signs that are necessarily of same nature and belong to the same structure. The signified that gets shaped with the possession of uniqueness (authenticity) by the cultural heritage sites is subject to examination here.

Instead of exporting the historical and other values of cultural heritage, the Indian attempt remains limited to importing the visitors through the persuasive visual means compelling the tourists to travel to the actual destinations so that they can experience the places that they virtually have been to. The deliberate attempt that reproduces the gateways to heritage sites into location-turned-into-museums may be perceived as the manufacturing of reservoir of cultural forms to assist the visitors to become accomplished tourists. With the heritage sites appearing in and reproducing their value through the mean of maps, brochures, paintings, and in many cases movies, the image of heritage site often gets essentially imprinted as one of the spots to be visited during sight-seeing (*a term that was recorded to be used in 1847 for the first time*), and that is absolutely awkward.

In spite of the consideration that the heritage is a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995), the greater desire of the mankind to conserve or alter tangible heritages (*buildings, structures, and artefact and so on*) as well as to protect intangible heritages (*language, music, performance, religion, beliefs and customary practices*) may be considered as the outcome of the urge to protect and further celebrate the history without which the mankind will have no text to refer to or no external references to be guided by. This urge can possibly be seen as a mean of staying at distance from the '*death of man*', the foucauldian understanding of which refers to the death of particular conception of man that has been sanctioned by the humanist tradition which sees man in terms of '*measure of all things*' (Sim, 1999). In this context, Peckham can also be quoted who argues that the instruments of honoring and preserving have its background in the fear of loss. (Smith & Akagawa, 2008)

Finding the Location of the Cultural Heritage Sites: A Semiotic Approach: As many would figure out, the term 'finding the location' has barely any intention to physically spot the existing cultural heritage sites, and the attempt rather is to examine the psychic location of cultural heritage sites in India. The term 'location of cultural heritage sites' rests on the exploration pertaining to whether the cultural heritage sites have become signs that the society re-functionalizes and talks about as if it was the pure instance of use or whether the heritage sites are grasped as tendency of culture to convert history into nature - 'alibi' as called by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. (Culler, 1981)

'Tourist Spot', a much used term at least to those living in India and willing to find the getaways during weekends, does not offer very clear meaning – whether the repeated visits of tourists have made that place recognized or whether the natural beauty or any other offering of that place has

made it a place where tourists are found to visit. With the consideration that the tourists are interested in everything as a sign of itself instead of the alibis that the society uses to re-functionalize its practices, the tourists are mere packages that believe in the signification than the use-value or need, as uttered by Baudrillard while defining an accurate theory of social objects (Baudrillard, n.d.).

With the time, travelers became tourists and the activity of traveling necessarily a commodity. The narrative created and the touristic code developed undoubtedly determine what one ought to see and the tourists end up seeing things that appear to them as authentic but actually are reproduced signs like mementos, souvenirs etc. The way the package of tourists is sent to any location resembles the S-M-C-R model of communication in the process of which the sender is the tour operators/tourism agencies and the receiver is the location-turned-into-sites. But that is only the technical aspect though. The message has been encoded with the previously available narratives and it becomes the obligation of the tourists to decode the meaning in accordance with what they see i.e. signs that have already been subject to '*unlimited semiosis*' paving the path for a series of successive interpretants to follow. Needless to say that the meaning of a sign is not contained within it and rather arises from its interpretation.

It would not be wrong to assume that the Taj Mahal, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, which was declared as the World Heritage Site under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in the year 1983, consciously or unconsciously reproduced itself on the line of cultural signification with the advertisement of the Taj Mahal tea (1990) that featured maestro Zakir Hussain.
Neither is ignorable the fact that the *tabla* gained significance in the popular imagination with this advertisement under such circumstances when globalization would take another decade to reflect its effects at least in India. Immediate brand immorality was created when the little fellow (*who will become Aditya Kalyanpur latter*) said in compelling tone, "*Arre huzoor, Wah Taj Boliye*" and that was not only to

Figure-1: The Tea Cup and The Tabla Maestro, The Hindu
(http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/the-teacup-and-the-tabla-maestro/article6691609.ece)

correct Zakir Hussain saying '*Wah Ustaad*' but also to make some significant changes in the visitor statistics of the Taj Mahal. The significant increase in the number of visitors of the Taj Mahal during the domain of 1989-90 & 1990-91 aptly testifies the location of cultural heritage as being perceived as something equally aristocrat as the Taj Mahal tea, if not the vice versa.

Year	Number of Visitors
1984-85	1129230
1985-86	1139420
1986-87	1561839
1987-88	1390623
1988-89	1542456
1989-90	2016062
1990-91	1144459
1991-92	1223012
1992-93	1588628
1993-94	2108135
1994-95	1984997
1996-97	1890548
1997-98	1411545
1998-99	1567180

Figure-2: Visitor Statistics, 1984-85 to 1998-99, Taj Mahal Conservation Collaborative (ip51.icomos.org)

As many would not want to miss the chance to stand in front of the Taj Mahal even during a real quick trip to Delhi, the time spent just to appreciate this magnificent specimen of Moghul structure, if not anything more than that, gets highly backed by the compelling story that Shah Jahan had his minions cut off the hands of the Taj Mahal's architect and his workers after the structure was completed in order to ensure that they would never build another of its kind (History.com, 2011). It is quite clear that the quest here is driven towards transcending the working class on the line of history and the desire is to experience the monumental representation of what Marx says '*abstract, undifferentiated human labor*'. As Dean MacCannell figures out, the Egyptian Pyramids will also exemplify this (MacCannell & Lippard, 1999). Besides offering limited rendering of the past, the heritage sites are recognized for their ability to ensure subjective engagements that in turn add the adjective 'extraordinary' – a word that gets its place via cultural determination and conventional representation.

Khangchendzonga National Park, the one and only mixed cultural heritage site in India (Centre, 2016), redefines itself with the text 'Explore Wonderful Experience' on its website www.knpsikkim.in and invites those who are willing to explore unique diversity of plains, valleys, lakes, glaciers and spectacular, snow-capped mountains covered with ancient forests, including the world's third highest peak, Mount Khangchendzonga. What is noticeable here is the connection made on the ground of semiotics between individual sight and production of knowledge. It might look like the production of such touristic sights are dependent on the local and fortuitous semiotic mechanism but the fact is that the touristic code is purely the production of what Culler says the '*modern consensus of vast scope, a systematized, value-laden knowledge of the world*' (Waterton & Watson, 2014). If the photos of lakes, glaciers, mountains, rivers and waterfalls given on the website are to be taken to the level of deconstruction, what will be vivid only is the performance and practice of those objects. When the 40th World Heritage Committee inscribed Khangchendzonga National Park of Sikkim as UNESCO's World Heritage Site on 'Mixed' criteria recognizing the outstanding universal values for its both natural and cultural significance ("GENERAL / LATEST NEWS: ENVIS Centre, ministry of environment & forest, Govt. Of India," 2016), the mythological stories

associated with the Mount Khangchendzonga and caves, rivers, lakes *et cetra* got revived and the Khangchendzonga National Park participated in the *sight sacralization* process, a thought has been put forward by Dean MacCannell. The four core elements active behind the process of *sight sacralization* are the attraction, the tourist, the sight itself and the marker i.e. necessarily a sign or a system of signs indicative of touristic significance of the sight in its cultural context. Needless to say that the cultural context here is the fact that the natural elements are object of worship to the indigenous people of Sikkim and the sacred meanings of the previously mentioned mythological stories and practices have been integrated with the Buddhist beliefs and further take part in the identity formation of the Sikkimese people.

Both the Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi and Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya were recognized as cultural heritage sites respectively in 1989 and 2002 due to their outstanding universal value. In this context, what comes to the mind at first is the comment of the Art Historian Annapurna Garimella, '*Attempts to find the birthplace of the Buddha or conserve Buddhist monuments in Bodh Gaya, for example, were archaeological as well as political activities*' (Garimella, 2010). If counted correctly, the Ajanta caves are recognized as the first Buddhist cave monuments at Ajanta and do reflect the same urge of the masterpieces of Buddhist religious art being protected rather than the caves themselves. Annapurna Garimella opines that Gautama Siddharta represented a case study of how most of the Subcontinent was brought under the sway of a single ideology, a subject close to the heart of inquisitive imperialists. As the website Madhya Pradesh Tourism makes an attempt to uphold certain values which are provided in the manner given below, further addition of the tagline 'Road to Enlightenment' makes it even more remarkable:

- UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Mahastupa' (Great Stupa) Stands Here
- Home To The Gupta Temple, One Of The Earliest Examples Of Temple Architecture
- Displays Gupta Art Through Udaygiri Caves That Were Built In 5th Century
- Houses 4 Gateways That Showcase Buddha's Life Through Intricate Carvings
- The Lion Capital of Ashokan Place Can Be Found At The Archeological Museum ("Sanchi - GREAT STUPA, Buddhist heritage sites," n.d.)

As it is quite clear, the due construction of touristic attraction has been done in a very efficient manner with an apt application of heritage values. Such taglines, mentioned above and displayed on the website of the Madhya Pradesh Tourism, do not only allure with the offering of an authentic experience but also pave the path for visuality to be developed through the contextual interpretation. The selection of these two places i.e. Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi and Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya as heritages might be seen as a mean to recognize religious tolerance as well as to tag India as a peace loving country which might be a possible but very little-explored aspect.

Despite the fact that 'Incredible India' has its magnetic appeal active which is indeed adept enough at fetching the tourists from home and abroad, what remains highly ignored is the location of the signified that gets constructed by the signs and symbols that are made to appear as larger than they are. A clear elucidation can be made here with the help of an example – why is the Taj Mahal visited? Is it enough for it to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World? (this may be a good enough reason for many) Is it because of the existence of the compelling story that Shah Jahan had his minions cut off the hands of the Taj Mahal's architect(s)? Or is the visit just to appreciate the magnificent specimen of the Moghul structure?

Politics of Selection and the Selection of Cultural Heritage Sites: Both the terms selection and *deselection*, apart from bearing the dictum of the assigned tone, do not only clarify the meaning-determining information but also carry the surface features of the action of choosing the best or the fittest, and choosing in this context gets accompanied by the notion of separation and elimination making the selected entity distinguished and the rest the 'others'. The pronounced hierarchy or the denounced 'otherness' that gets shaped with the selection of a handful is an undoubted representation of the competitiveness (evident even when the mode of competition is passive) that is looking for objects (cultural heritage sites here) that can compete to meet a pre-formulated set of criterions, if not anything more, for the purpose of making it easier for those objects to become redefined and have their values upheld.

The Outstanding Universal Value, achievement of which seems to be prime imperative, can be met only when one or more than one of the ten criterions are met along with the conditionings of authenticity and integrity. The problem here is multi-faceted: a) What does it take for a cultural heritage site to be identified or recognized as the bearer of 'Outstanding Universal Value'? b) What happens after the selection of the cultural heritage site? Does the increased number of footfalls reflect its success or does the journey of the heritage site need to be seen as successful on accomplishing the status of a global icon? c) Who is the beneficiary here? The cultural heritage site that itself did not know that it was up for competition and hence to get a better maintenance when selected as well as not selected (for nomination in future)? Or, is the beneficiary the tourists who were not even aware of the filthy competition? If yes, then how?

The standard of authenticity and integrity, which the cultural heritage sites are required to meet, remind of the Ship of Theseus that had its material renewed with the ongoing replacement of the rotten planks. So, necessarily the question arises that whether the selected cultural heritage sites reflect the intention of protection at all or do they become a mere imitation or representation.
With the consideration that the '*Outstanding Universal Value*' is the building block of the World Heritage list, it is of utmost importance to understand the term '*Outstanding Universal Value*' that has been indicated in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2005):

"*Outstanding universal value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.*" (art. 49)

The concept of '*Outstanding International Value*' (O.U.V) is a much debated one and the most of the debate has been centered on the clarification of the concept of the O.U.V. A very close look is much needed here towards the words like exceptional, national boundaries, common importance, and most importantly cultural and/or natural significance. While the first six criterion refer to cultural heritage that can represent i) a masterpiece ii) important interchange of values iii) exceptional testimony to a civilization iv) a type of construction or site v)traditional land use, and/or vi) associations with traditions or beliefs, the criteria from vii to x refer to natural heritage. (Jokilehto, 2006)

In the process of *heritigisation*, the benefitted actors are not only the heritage sites themselves that have a protective gaze on them right after the selection. Besides being a successful implementation of the attempt of UNESCO to '*build peace in the minds of men*' ("UNESCO in the making," 2015) by transcending the cultural significance, the cultural heritage site selection

becomes an identity markers for those countries that seek to uphold their colonial or historical or cultural past or difference, even across the regions within a same country. And, perhaps, the tag of the 'World Heritage' itself is sufficient enough to disclose the global nature of the cultural heritage sites rather than the local, definitely on the lines of driving the economy.

References:

1. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1995). *Theorizing heritage*. Ethnomusicology, 39(3), 367-380.
2. Sim, S. (1999). *Derrida and the End of history*. New York, NY: In the U.S., distributed to the trade by National Book Network.
3. Smith, L., & Akagawa, N. (Eds.). (2008). *Intangible heritage*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
4. Culler, J. (1981). SEMIOTICS OF TOURISM. The American Journal of Semiotics, 1(1), 127–140.
5. Baudrillard, J. (n.d.). *Political Economy*, 29-30.
6. History.com (2011). The Taj Mahal- facts & summary. history.com. Retrieved from http://www.history.com/topics/taj-mahal
7. MacCannell, D., & Lippard, L. R. (1999). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
8. Centre, U. W. H. (2016, September 21). India - UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Retrieved October 19, 2016, from http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/in
9. Waterton, E., & Watson, S. (2014). *The semiotics of heritage tourism*. Luton, United Kingdom: Channel View Publications.
10. GENERAL / LATEST NEWS: ENVIS Centre, Ministry of Environment & Forest, Govt. Of India. (2016, October 7). Retrieved October 19, 2016, from http://sikenvis.nic.in/ViewGeneralLatestNews.aspx?Id=4982&Year=2016
11. Garimella, A. (2010, April 17). *The politics of heritage*. Retrieved October 19, 2016, from http://www.deccanherald.com/content/64404/politics-heritage.html
12. Sanchi - GREAT STUPA, Buddhist heritage sites. Retrieved October 19, 2016, from http://www.mptourism.com/tourist-destinations/sacred-sanchi.html
13. UNESCO in the making. (2015, February 2). Retrieved October 19, 2016, from http://en.unesco.org/70years/unesco_making
14. Jokilehto J. 2006, *Considerations on authenticity and integrity in world heritage context*. City & Time 2 (1): 1. [online] URL:http://www.ct.ceci-br.org