

The *Puja* of the Incredible Self : An Analysis of Incredible India’s “Find The Incredible You” Campaign

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Incredible India is a tourism initiative launched by the Ministry of Tourism of India in 2002. Over the last 18 years, it has published several posters, videos, and documentaries to market India through print, digital and other media. This paper focuses on one such campaign launched in 2018 entitled “#Find The Incredible You” (FTIY), consisting of five videos published over four months. As the hashtag suggests, the videos pitch to tourists a uniquely cathartic experience in India through which they can discover an enhanced version of themselves (see Appendix A for the video summaries). Each video centers around a tourist’s experience of a niche aspect that India has to offer. “The Yogi of the Racetrack” follows a racing champion’s immersion into the traditionally Vedic practice of yoga, while “The Maharani of Manhattan” has a New York fashion designer of panache exploring Rajasthan’s luxury. “The Sanctuary in Paris” is a poignant tale of a Parisian bookshop owner inspired by the story of the Indian rhinoceros to reopen his bookstore, with “The Reincarnation of Mr. & Mrs. Jones” seeing an old couple rejuvenating their marriage and themselves through another Vedic practice of *ayurveda*. The last video, and perhaps the liveliest of them all, is a refreshing palate cleanser titled “The Masala Masterchef,” and follows a European chef’s gastronomic travels in India. The salient themes highlighted in the videos are “Yoga,” “Luxury,” “Wildlife,” “Ayurveda,” and “Cuisine”. While these are themes or tropes that have been marketed by Incredible India since its inception, this paper explores how “Find the Incredible You” engages in a fresher, more sensitive treatment of the same.

All of the academic literature surrounding the Incredible India campaign has critiqued its tourism posters published before 2014, and unfortunately, the academic press has not yet addressed the videos discussed in this paper. At first glance, the similarities between the themes and content of posters and the videos are striking, and thus merits a deeper look at the existing state of knowledge about Incredible India. In 2012, Finola Kerrigan et al. pioneered the study of Incredible India as a nation branding exercise, and used the framework of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* to posit that “the tendency to orientalise India is an underlying element

of the IIC [Incredible India Campaign]" (323), adding that Incredible India engages in "Othering itself" and "internalizes stereotypes" (324). Eleonora Federici uses a semiotic approach to analyse IIC's branding, and employs Said's framework in pointing out that India is shown as:

a *land* of self-discovery....The idea transmitted is that for the Western tourist India is a spiritual *destination* that transforms the visitor; it is the *place* of wellness and regeneration. Thus the proposed image is a romanticized view of India as a spiritual *place* or as a *treasure trove* of 'Oriental' wisdom. (130, emphasis mine)

It is necessary here to orient ourselves to the rubrics of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) and his definition of "orientalism" so that we can better understand the points Kerrigan and Federici are making, and especially because the framework is used later in this paper. Said considers the idea of the "Orient" as a reduced peoples to be partly constructed by European narratives, and defines "Orientalism [as] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). He sums up by illustrating that "Orientalism ... puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (15), indicating that the Westerner gains this superiority by generalizing another people (Othering them) as inferior or weak. Said also provides us with the portrayal of timelessness as a characteristic feature of Orientalism, which he holds to be "dogmatic views of the Oriental as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction" (16). Put together, Orientalism according to him involves portrayals of Western superiority, exotic mysteriousness, and timelessness. Kerrigan and Federici are conveying the idea that by showing India as a "treasure trove of Oriental wisdom," IIC bestows relative superiority to the Western tourist, who is free to consume what he wants in India, and "marginalizes" (125) the voice of the Indian people. By using terms such as "land of self-discovery", "place" and "treasure trove", both authors imply that India is shown as a toured object easily Orientalised by the campaign, with the tourist's superiority rooted in his Western identity of money, privilege and superior culture.

The very title of the new "Find the Incredible You" campaign, as well as the hyperbole in "Incredible" seems to wonderfully encapsulate an India that Federici calls an exotic "land of self-discovery," with the themes of *ayurveda*, reincarnation, and luxury portraying the country as a "place of wellness and regeneration." It appears to naturally follow that the new campaign is similarly "orientalis[ing] India" and "Othering itself." In fact, the popular press might already have come to this conclusion, with Reena Gupta's Special Broadcasting Service, Australia, (SBS) 'expose' concluding that "the branding of India as a *land* of timeless exotic mystique, offering up culture and *commodities* ripe for the taking

may not be a particularly new idea, but in this case, it's India itself that's serving up those stereotypes" (SBS, emphasis mine). Gupta touches upon the same "Western superiority" critique as Kerrigan in claiming that Incredible India relies on the fact that a Western tourist harbours a desire for "cultural appropriation" and the "fantasy of being able to *consume* Indian things without having to deal with ... Indian people." To her, Incredible India again shows India as a toured object waiting to be sold and purchased by the rupee. Gupta Socratically explains the quandary that Incredible India is Orientalising itself by claiming that this is a function of the campaign being "advertising after all"; the campaign will do anything to attract Western tourists and their accompanying money. Gupta clearly believes that the Western man's power lies in his purse, and that the Indian lust for the greenback holds sway over Incredible India to the extent that it will Orientalize itself. Thus, both the academic and popular press scrutinize the campaign's contents to concur that through each element, Incredible India assigns the tourist superiority through his Western identity, in a transactional and cultural sense. But is the campaign really showing a Western identity to be superior to India? Further, does Orientalism always have to deal with the natives shown?

I argue that the FTIY campaign voids notions of Western superiority by deliberately framing the tourists' experience in India as a form of *puja* (to the point of each experience following the typical structure of such worship) and counters an "exotic" and "timeless" image of India portraying these *puja*-experiences as memories, and employing syncretism. In doing so, the campaign is successful in not Orientalizing itself in reference to Said's definition of Orientalism. I suggest that the *puja* is in fact a quintessential portrayal of existential authenticity, and that a campaign involving existential authenticity must effectively integrate the tourist into its portrayal. I suggest that the adoption of existential authenticity in tourism campaigns around the world warrants a broader discussion of Orientalism, one that accounts for the fact that a campaign can still lapse into Othering or Orientalizing the tourist as well.

I will first address how the FTIY initiative voids any sense of Western superiority over India by framing the protagonists in each of the five videos to be performing a Hindu *puja*, each in their own way. Each of the protagonists shown in the five videos, from Mr. and Mrs. Jones to the Parisian bookstore owner, perform some version of *puja* (literally meaning worship in Hindi) in their unique journey of self-discovery. Susan Lewandowski considers *puja* to be "the most common form of worship today in India" (68), and is typically comprised of prayer or reflection, chants, purification by washing one's feet with water, an offering of food or flowers for the worshipper to take back with him, and the ringing of the temple bell (69-70). I will illustrate how Incredible India tackles two basic tenets of Orientalism – of Western superiority (transactional and cultural) and the depiction

of timelessness, by showing the tourists to be performing each of these activities in order. Rather than images of the tourist casually “consuming” what India has to offer, the performance of these rituals shows the experience of the tourist as non-transactional, reflective and culturally sensitive.

Each of the five videos begins with a reflection on the part of the protagonist. “The Sanctuary in Paris” shows the Parisian bookstore owner reminiscing how the Indian rhinoceros saved his bookstore, while “The Yogi of the Racetrack” has the racing champion meditating on both his travels in India and the race ahead. Similarly, “The Masala Masterchef” and “The Maharani in Manhattan” show the chef and fashion designer introspecting about their respective professions. The reflections themselves are framed as similar to Zen *kōans*, using double-edged words and puns, such as “when I put on the helmet, I am *still* in India” (Yogi, 0:08). The fact that these reflections are triggered precisely when the protagonists are going about their everyday rituals (walking up to present a dish, opening the bookstore and settling books, or gearing up for a race) compounds both the *pūja* experience and the gravity with which they view their time in India.

Incredible India builds up this sanguine atmosphere with the theme of washing away the tourist’s troubles, akin to washing one’s feet before entering a temple and performing *pūja*. The campaign is careful here to not frame India as a magical panacea for the Western tourist; rather it chooses to celebrate the passion and verve with which the protagonists are trying to carve out a better perspective for themselves. “The Sanctuary in Paris” depicts a parallel between the rhinoceros stepping in mud (0:33), and a tired, but inspired Parisian stepping in a lake and splashing water into the sky (0:37). Furthermore, “The Reincarnation of Mr. & Mrs. Jones” shows parallels between an initial scene at the seashore with a sedate Mr. Jones and a tense relationship (0:08), and the closing scene where the old couple enjoy the receding waves together (0:54). This is combined with “The Maharani of Manhattan” and its portrayal of the Maharani pensively soaking in the swimming pool (0:35). The IIC is successful in both marketing the curative power of an Indian experience and stressing its sacred stature for the tourist through the *pūja* imagery, thus maintaining the balance between India and the tourist, the East and the West.

Incredible India underlines this non-transactional relationship between India and the tourist by presenting a familiar tourist trope – the souvenir – as a deeply personal and sacred offering given to a temple devotee after *pūja*, rather than one purchased by a tourist. Of course, while money exchanges hands when any tourist goes abroad, the device of the offering goes far in abstracting away money from the tourist’s engagement with India. This is primarily shown in “The

Sanctuary in Paris”, “The Maharani of Manhattan” and “The Masala Masterchef”. In the former, the campaign carefully positions the miniature Indian rhinoceros as a transformative reminder of India for the Parisian bookshop owner. The video shows a poignant parallel between the endangered rhinoceros, and the endangered, rare bookshop that is labelled as a “sanctuary”. To emphasize this, the video depicts the Parisian placing the miniature rhinoceros in his bookshop as the first thing he does when he gets back (0:05). Finally, the video attaches a personal touch to what initially seems to be just a tchotchke through the Parisian’s last scene in India – the Assamese guide runs to hand over the replica to him, which is wrapped not in some exotic cloth, but in a Bengali newspaper cutting (0:45-0:48). The video chooses to zoom in only on the duo’s hands here, to highlight the heightened emotions of a pair of newly minted friends waiting to wave goodbye. Similarly, “The Maharani of Manhattan” makes a deliberate and nuanced attempt to ensure that the peacock dress is less a commissioning of a dress by a queen or the purchase of ethnic Indian wear by a tourist, and more a celebration of the Indian artist. The Maharani and the Tailor’s exchange is quite literally just that – an exchange, of ideas, cultures and aesthetics. By cutting shots to make the camera focus on both the Tailor (0:21) and the Maharani (0:22) explaining their viewpoints, the video shows that both the Maharani and the Tailor are connoisseurs of cloth in their own fashion, and both have a say in the creation of the dress. The video doesn’t just stop here though. It shows the Tailor with his final input (0:23) as he points to possibly an artwork on the wall, and the Maharani’s acquiescing smile. The fact that the Tailor personally delivers the dress beyond the call of duty underscores the non-transactional nature of the duo’s meeting. Interestingly, “The Masala Masterchef” takes this notion of being offered vegetarian food at a temple (called *prasadam*) quite literally, beginning with a sequence of *langar* being served at The Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. Rather than open with a dazzling smorgasbord of Masterchef-esque Indian food and gluttony, the video elects to show simple food made by *karsevaks* (volunteers for a religious cause) and served to all devotees (0:11-0:15). That the food is made at a Sikh temple seems to cast a doubt on the overarching device of the Hindu temple, but this is an element of syncretism that I will explain later. This notwithstanding, the simple, rustic opening to the video forces the protagonist (and the viewer) to meditate upon food, and view it in a deeper light. The fact that all of the dishes shown in the video seem to be vegetarian (*lassi*, *roti*, Kerala *sadhya*, *dosa*, *kadhai paneer*, and even the spiced-up dessert that the Masterchef presents) underscores its sacred nature, as only vegetarian food can be offered as *prasadam* at Hindu temples.

Incredible India also teases up an explicit marker of its *pūja*-theme in the closing outro of each video, where a distinctive temple bell is rung, signifying that the *pūja* is complete, and the worshipper is taking his leave. The *pūja* ennobles each engagement involving the tourist and India, and by abstracting away money,

consumerist desires and cultural hyperbole, it is successful in removing Western superiority. Thus, Incredible India insures itself from accusations of portraying Western superiority by constructing the tourist's Indian experience as a sacred, enlightening *pūja*, while taking great pain to avoid specifying the deity being worshipped (and the possibility that one might construe the video to be patronizing Western tourists as ignorant or callous).

However, there are side-effects of labelling a campaign “Incredible India” and portraying each element in a video as a sacred component – the inevitable charge of engaging in hyperbolic, exotic representation. This side-effect is the second tenet of Orientalism according to Said – one where the Orient is shown as “exotic,” “timeless” and unchanging, making it liable to “distortion” and “inaccuracy” (8). These are terms that Gupta uses to critique the “Maharani” video as well. Incredible India subtly employs the device of memories to counter the impression of India as a timeless land, and combines this with elements of syncretism to emphasize a changing India.

Each memory is shown as an out-of-body experience, with the dialogue narrated in first-person but the sequences shot in third-person to emphasize both a reflection of the past and engagement with the present. The memories incorporate the concept of the reflective flashback (as underlined above), fast-paced sequences, and sharp-cuts and montages. The sequences in India are frenzied, resembling both passionate memories arising from some stimulus, as well as a frenzied, diverse India as well. Interestingly, the transitions between montages are not smooth at all. There is an abrupt fade to black, and then the explosion of colours onto the screen, to simulate the blinking of the eye (0:47-0:53 in “The Masala Masterchef” is particularly illustrative of this technique). The campaign thus chooses to show memories of tourists with perspectives and narratives run by the tourists rather than a virtual slideshow of India's exotic diversity dictated by a mysterious, invisible narrator. That the tourists are themselves shown in the memories highlights the reflexive nature of the Indian experience, and humanizes the tourists shown. Memories of the past lend a concrete, realistic feeling to the video, and the campaign thus avoids painting India as exotic or mysterious.

The campaign also employs syncretism to showcase India as a nation in flux, and not an ossified, timeless place. The campaign portrays this with aerial shots of Rajasthan's forts and palaces in “The Maharani of Manhattan” (0:12 and 0:16), which combine aspects of Mughal and Hindu architecture. It also includes depictions of Rajasthani miniature paintings, which incorporate both Persian and Gujarati styles, in palaces (0:28) and in small studios (0:31). Even the loan words “Maharani” and “Masala” imply a sense of linguistic exchange. The campaign rounds off this thread of cultural change and newness in “The Reincarnation of

Mr. & Mrs. Jones,” with Mrs. Jones reflecting that *ayurveda* “keep[s] a culture centuries old, forever young.” The reincarnation theme serves to underscore the fact that India is not a timeless relic to be marveled at in museums – it is a living and breathing entity with a voice of its own.

The “Find the Incredible You” campaign thus employs the rich, subtle imagery of the Hindu *puja* and nuanced devices of the memory in a determined effort to shake off previous accusations of the Incredible India campaign being “Orientalist.” The decision to use predominantly Hindu undertones to depict a secular country might seem jarring or unconvincing at first, but as Lee Edwards and Anandi Ramamurthy have pointed out, Incredible India has been using “tropes” to “align with the BJP’s [Bharatiya Janata Party] Hindutva agenda” since its inception. The marked change in the way India is portrayed through the eyes of the traveler can probably be ascribed to the Ministry of Tourism changing Incredible India’s advertising director from New York firm Ogilvy & Mather, to the local McCann Worldwide in 2015. The result is a clear focus on marketing based on what Ning Wang calls “existential authenticity” (358).

The FTIY campaign and its focus on the *puja* is clearly the embodiment of Wang’s version of existential authenticity, which “refers to a potential existential state of Being that is to be activated by tourist activities” (352). Wang believes this existential authenticity to be a key driver of tourists, claiming that “tourists are rather in search of their authentic selves with the aid of activities or toured objects” (360). The incredulity in its title and the experience of a *puja* aim to emphasize what Ning Wang calls the “extra-mundane”. The combination of the *puja* as a metaphysical, yet Indian activity and its connection to existential authenticity has great currency in harmonizing portrayals of the East and the West, and avoids Orientalism (as viewed by Kerrigan, Federici and Gupta) by voiding the tourist’s Western identity and Western superiority and championing the realization of the Self. The portrayal of existential authenticity (through the *puja*) succeeds in abstracting away notions of Western superiority.¹ The *puja* and the resulting focus on existential authenticity thus make the protagonists an integral part of the videos, and of the campaign as well. They, and their stories become as much part of the

¹ As an aside, a skeptic would ask here: doesn’t the tourist’s story of the *puja* have “superiority” because it caters to the tourist’s selfish drive to find his Incredible Self? One could even extend this line of reasoning to each element in the videos; don’t the Indian people, the wildlife, and the food all serve to appeal to the tourist’s desire? However, it is a truism that a tourism campaign will cater each element of its body towards tourists. Under this aegis, we could label every tourism campaign in the world as Orientalist, and the word “Orientalism” would lose all meaning here. I suggest that our notions of superiority here might be emanating from the negative connotation we assign to marketing and capitalism. However, *Orientalism* is not about superiority of an individual person by virtue of marketing. It is about the reduction, weakening, or Othering of peoples and cultures into stereotypes.

portrayal of India as the Indians shown. It also uses a diverse cast from diverse fields to avoid stereotyping the tourist, notable among them a racing champion, a French-African man in Paris and a feisty old couple. This incorporation of the foreigner and sensitive portrayal of diversity avoids what Said calls “terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics” (preface, xxix).

Since tourism campaigns involving existential authenticity portray both the tourist and the native, one must consider whether either is being Othered in evaluating whether the campaign is being Orientalist or not, and not conflate the two. Gupta seems to fall prey to this conflation, as she speaks of “tired, Western souls” and “anxiety-ridden white women” in her article, yet consistently considers Orientalism in terms of India and its people only, and not the “white woman” in the video. As shown above, FTIY is successful in tackling both, but this might not be true of all iterations of Incredible India, or even all tourism campaigns. A sensitive tourism campaign which promises existential authenticity must therefore be careful in its treatment not only of the natives, but also of the tourists shown, and neither should be Othered. Such a focus could be of discursive relevance in discussing Orientalism in tourism campaigns even when the prospective tourist is not the conventional Westerner (e.g. a French-African in Paris as in “Sanctuary” or an old couple whose marriage is graying as in “Reincarnation”), and with the rise in touristic ambitions of Asia’s affluent middle class, even when the tourist is not from the West.

Through this paper, I have shown how Incredible India’s valiant attempt to use a *puja* to show the Indian experience as an intermingling of equal cultures is successful. The “Find The Incredible You” campaign and its focus on existential authenticity emerged as incredibly instructive in adding nuance to how we view Orientalism, indicating the need to broaden its scope to include the tourist as well.

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Appendix A

The following is a summary of the videos outlined in this paper.

1. "The Yogi of the Racetrack"

A racing champion is shown gearing up for a race. He reflects that while his profession has taken him all over the world, when he puts on his helmet, he is still in India. Next is a flashback of India, beginning with the him at a yoga ashram in India. His guru at the ashram guides him both in yoga and spirituality. A montage then has the racing champion exploring the Himalayas, Ganges, and "breathing out the noise" by performing yoga. The video concludes with a parallel between a yoga *asana* (pose) he performs in India, and a bike-stunt he performs while racing.

Note: This video was the recipient of the "Best Tourism Video – Asia" award at the UNWTO Awards for Innovation in Tourism, 2019.

Incredible India. "The Yogi of the Racetrack." Incredible India, 8 Mar. 2018. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/l1mEuutHY9A>

2. "The Sanctuary in Paris"

The owner of a Parisian bookstore opens his shop, sets down a small replica of a rhinoceros on his table and enigmatically reflects: "I was going to shut down

my bookstore. But the Indian rhino saved it.” Cut to a flashback of early morning at Kaziranga in Assam, India. The Parisian sets out on a wildlife safari with an Assamese guide, who recounts the tale of the endangered Indian rhino – its numbers have made a comeback from 400 to 2,400. Next is a montage of Indian wildlife, the Parisian rejuvenating himself in a waterfall nearby, and partaking in *Bihu*, an Assamese folk dance performed for prosperity in times of storm (called *kal-boishakhi* in Bengali).

Incredible India. “The Sanctuary in Paris.” Incredible India, , 12 Jun. 2018. YouTube, <https://youtu.be/xCIrrPY5Dk>

3. “The Maharani of Manhattan”

A fashion designer (the Maharani) is interviewed in her Manhattan office, and is asked what “luxury” means to her. This prompts a flashback of her travels in India. She is shown reclining in one of the carriages on a luxury train akin to the Palace on Wheels of fame. She is driven up to her fort-hotel, and then we see sequences of the Maharani admiring Indian artwork in palaces, forts and small studios. Salient is an interaction she has with an Indian weaver (whom I dub “the Tailor”), where she requests him to weave a dress based on a peacock sculpture. A montage of the Maharani soaking in a swimming pool, riding up Rajasthan’s hills, and dancing the traditional *ghoomar* is shown. The video concludes with a parallel between the Tailor walking up to the Maharani to present the dress to her in India, and the Maharani walking up wearing the dress for a photoshoot.

Incredible India. “The Maharani of Manhattan.” Incredible India, 30 Jun. 2018. YouTube, https://youtu.be/dj1l_6n4ef0

4. “The Reincarnation of Mr. & Mrs. Jones”

An old couple (the generic Mr. and Mrs. Jones) are at their 40th wedding anniversary party, and are called upon to dance together. Mrs. Jones then reflects about “reincarnation – India showed us what its really about.” We next see scenes of the couple getting an *ayurveda* massage, with one of the masseuses responding to Mr. Jones’ obvious discomfort with “a little pain is good, reminds us we are alive.” Next is a rustic scene in the rain, with the drenched Jones visiting an *ayurvedic* spice shop. The Jones then visit an *ayurveda* doctor, who asks them to take a sip of a rejuvenating drink. This seems to have its effect, as an erstwhile weary Mr. Jones practices *Kalaripayattu*, the oldest martial art in India and one with its roots in religion and *ayurveda*. The video concludes with the couple finally bonding at a *Kathakali* performance, which is paralleled with them dancing joyously at their anniversary.

The specific clothes, spices, performances and martial arts shown all have their roots in Kerala.

Incredible India. “The Reincarnation of Mr. & Mrs. Jones.” Incredible India, 23 Jul. 2018. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/aW35OAPJlas>

5. “The Masala Masterchef”

A gourmet chef is shown adding the final touches to a dish. He offers up a curiosity - “People often ask me what culinary school I went to. My answer is India.” The music transitions to a Sikh *kirtan* (spiritual song) and the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. The Masterchef observes the making and serving of *langar* (food served free of cost – akin to Hindu *prasadam*) at the temple. Next is the longest montage in the campaign, with the Masterchef sampling food from all across India in temples, fishermen’s boats, street corners, *paan* shops, and hotels. He comes to the realization that the “secret masala spices” in Indian food are in fact “the joy with which you cook and the love with which you serve.” The video (and the campaign) concludes with the Masterchef presenting a fusion (spiced-up) dessert with panache.

Incredible India. “The Masala Masterchef.” Incredible India, 13 Aug. 2018. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/nbsEgSvy4jQ>