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UWC2101J: Sites of Tourism

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In recent years, with the rise of the solo traveller and the “backpacker”, more and more tourism campaigns are being geared towards the promise of a personalized experience. This paper is about a promotional video [1] entitled “The Maharani of Manhattan | Luxury”, a part of one such campaign initiated by the Indian Tourism Ministry. Released in 2018, this video was one of five marketed under the aegis of the Incredible India campaign, using the popular hashtag “#FindTheIncredibleYou”, and was promoted via television and social media in overseas markets. The video starts off with the interview of an American woman (hereinafter referred to as the Maharani), who then recounts her travels and experiences in a rustic setting in northern India.

At first glance, the video seems to smoothly showcase the Maharani’s immersion into Indian culture and art. She feels that she is treated like a majestic queen in India, and is offered complete view of the beauty and music that India has to offer. A cathartic experience in the country transforms her lofty notion of luxury into a more profound, personal concept, and she goes back to Manhattan with an vivid recollection of her time in India. The richly laid background track and aerial shots of sweeping landscapes make this evolution seem seamless. This story arc sits well with the Incredible India campaign, as it checks all the boxes – the tourist is comfortable, the experience is meaningful, and the trip is memorable. But this linear and pristine progression of the tourist’s experience in India is not representative of the video’s underlying complexities. I will argue and show that the video actually ends up portraying the Maharani’s underlying insulation from her surroundings in India, and then attempts to ameliorate this by weaving cultural fusion into the narrative. To conclude, I will link how the splits in the video are a result of the Incredible India campaign trying to accomplish a challenging mission.

The Maharani, and Natives

A hierarchical distance is imposed on the dynamic between the tourist and the native right from the usage of Maharani as the title for the video. The loan word “Maharani” implicitly carries a sense of regal importance and superiority. In the video, this epithet assigned to the tourist is indicative of the distant relationship she shares with the Indian people she interacts with. The scene with the Maharani cruising to her hotel (0:11), smiling at and

acknowledging street musicians in traditional attire, is particularly striking here. She looks *back* at the street musicians in her vintage European car, as if not wanting to miss a single moment of the passing show she has just encountered. Her smile seems to be forced and out of character, and an adversarial opinion of the Maharani would even label her as patronising here. Like the Maharani's smile, the musicians seem to be carefully inserted here as a token element of Indianness to amuse her on her way. Despite the close proximity, the Maharani in her Chariot (the vintage European car) seems to be miles away from the musicians.

While an argument could be made that the scene is an accurate depiction of a tourist's experience in a fort-town in India, it must be stressed that this thread of isolation from the natives runs throughout the video. All the natives in the video, from the driver to the musicians in the first scene, to the grooms she hires when she rides up the hills (0:32), to the dancers and fire-throwers in the final scene (0:41), seem to be invisible faces dressed in traditional clothes – people whom she never engages with.

A notable exception, however, is her conversation with the experienced Tailor (0:21). The Maharani requests him to create a contemporary dress inspired from a peacock sculpture she sees in a palace. 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 Maharani is taken in by both the beauty of the bespoke dress he weaves, and by the generosity he shows her by delivering the dress in person (0:50). This artistic, engaging rapport is poles apart from the Maharani's general remoteness from natives in India. This conflict ties back into this paper's claim that the video is equivocal at times due to the constrained nature of the creator's objective.

Another point of note is that video portrays all the palaces and museums the Maharani visits as devoid of people (0:25) except for the Maharani. The Maharani thus never meets any Indian native by chance – the video ensures that all her meetings are preordained, and initiated by her. Again, while one might say that this is a stylistic choice by the creators to emphasize the importance of the self in travel, it is hard to fathom the gulf in how effectively the Maharani can drink in (and learn from) India without being shown to have a spontaneous dialogue with her hosts.

Curtains of Luxury

The Maharani is clearly a woman of panache, perhaps the quintessence of New York fashion, and certainly an aesthete. India's palaces (0:27), its heritage crystallized in time (0:28), and its art (0:30) enamour the Maharani, and she curates her niche Indian experience in her own reflection as the aesthete. The world of luxury and fashion is definitely vital to her, and so is the professed enlightenment she gains about the true meaning of luxury.

The Ministry's objective of attracting foreign tourists comes to the fore here as well. Caught in the desire to show a luxurious air of opulence, the video ends up portraying all of the Maharani's experiences as manicured. Of note is the scene depicting her sojourn up the hills (0:31). The presence of two grooms and horses on standby makes a perfectly natural experience seem very conditioned. Further, the Maharani travels on the famous 'Palace of

Wheels' luxury train (0:06), and stays in a palace refurbished as a hotel, in keeping with the regal theme. The video's attempt to showcase India as a rejuvenating panacea for the high-strung life results in further insulating the tourist from the country in a bubble of luxury. The comforts the Maharani is surrounded with are so radically different from the traditional life of the average Indian that there is an invisible curtain of separation between the two.

The background reflection about luxury also reinforces the paradox of the Maharani rediscovering herself through her travels in India while being distant from it. The refrain of the word "yours" and phrases such as "...it can be all designed around you" (0:23) emphasizes the one-dimensional nature of the Maharani's experience. The narrative might also offer a glimpse at what the Incredible India campaign wants a tourist to feel in India – "that you are the Maharani of the world...all the beauty is yours, all the music is yours". The campaign is appealing to the potential tourist's human tendency to be indulged through this message.

Fusion as a Bridge

Elements of fusion typically showcase an appreciation of two distinct cultures, as opposed to a reductive view of either of the two. I argue here that the video attempts to bridge the alienation of the tourist from the Indian people through the device of the peacock dress and the music track accompanying the video.

The peacock dress weaved by the Tailor quite literally weaves together different ideals of clothing into a tangible entity (0:33). While its form and shape is contemporary Western, it is embroidered in typically bright Indian colours of turquoise blue and red. The peacock, being the national bird of India, takes centre stage in the embellishment of the piece. Overall, the creation of the dress, with Indian embroidery filling up a Western canvas, seems to also represent the ideal tourist experience in India, according to the video's closing caption "Find the Incredible You". The degrees of separation between the Tailor's small studio and the Maharani's window office in Manhattan, as well as the parallels in the unboxing of the dress (0:46) make its journey seem even more impressive. The fact that the dress is worn with aplomb and appreciated in Manhattan as well (0:52), and that the Maharani chooses to include the dress in her magazine's Festive Issue¹, reflects the appreciation of Indian craftsmanship and culture in the West. This hints at a touch of national pride in the Incredible India campaign as well.

Another such element is the music track for the video. Keeping in step with the global viewer, the track starts off with mild European classical music, familiar to the ear. The track is punctured by a peacock's cry (0:17) when the Maharani is seen appreciating the sculpture's beauty in the palace. This is sustained until the Maharani finally meets and engages with the Tailor, when the *tabla* (a classical Indian percussion instrument) merges into the soundtrack, beginning with a soft beat and then rising in intensity to a crescendo. While not consciously

¹ one of the most important, and flamboyant issues in the fashion magazine calendar

apparent, the combination of the two instruments is used in the video to positively influence the viewer's perception of the Maharani's experience in India.

Conclusion

Through the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to unpack how the conflicting forces in the video are a result of the daunting mission that Incredible India has – to attract tourists to India *and* to do so in a manner that is genuinely Indian. This is because wooing tourists to pick India out of several possible destinations requires the advertising pitch to stand out and be distinctive; but this can compromise the genuineness of the India portrayed, and might even commoditize its culture. Likewise, trying to cut through to mainstream Indian culture would result in a loss of charm and appeal, and the risk of portraying a bland experience. I suggest that the layers of interpretation of this video (the Maharani's split from the Indian scene, and the bridging effect of the fusion) manifest themselves as a result of the Catch-22 of the campaign trying to pull too hard in either direction.

References

[1] Ministry of Tourism, India. "*The Maharani of Manhattan | Luxury | India*" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djil_6n4ef0. Published on YouTube, June 30, 2018.