

In Search of the Western Self in India

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How to theorise something that we know is a discursive construct, when at the same time it prompts tangible experiences for the research participants? This contribution departs from the conundrum of how to conceptualise a group of people that in the everyday context of travelling in India are generally referred to as “Western”. I treat “The West” as an influential cultural construct, but acknowledge that it generates lived experience.

The ethnographic focus lies on the Indian towns Dharamsala and Rishikesh, which are a magnet for Western identified spiritual travellers. The journeys they undertake to India have to be conceptualised within wider Orientalist imaginings¹. Here, as part of their Himalaya adventure, many engage with yoga, meditation and the diverse healing traditions on offer. Rooted in this specific context, the individuals draw on various Orientalist tropes, adhering to and simultaneously breaking open the binaries that are connected to those. Here, the construction of an Other to the Western self plays a significant role, ranging from representations of the “noble savage” to the “Oriental patriarch”. This often comes along with dualistic ascriptions, where the West is defined through its opposition to the East as materialist, consumerist, rational, modern and secular. Importantly, the powerful constructions also are revealed in situations when “the Other” does not comply to the imaginations.

The group of people is mainly from the middle-classes from various European and North American countries, and countries like Australia, Russia, Brazil and Argentina. Apart from being identified as Western because they are foreign and white, they also share a common pool of discourses that strongly informs their narratives about why they went on this journey, and about the answer to the question “why India?”.

¹ Said, Edward. 1978. “Orientalism”. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

I argue that in this particular context, what 'makes' them Western is their romantic search for emotional healing and spiritual guidance from “authentic Eastern” traditions, as well as their drawing on various modern discourses of the therapeutic ethos and the New Age, and the specific way they selectively incorporate ideas from Eastern spiritualities into this framework. Their “Westernness” here lies in their peculiar interpretation of Eastern spiritualities as tools to heal themselves and evolve emotionally. This discourse is acknowledged by the local tourism business as particularly “Western” and is catered to, for example in the many book shops focussing on novels about finding the self from classic to contemporary, on mindfulness and happiness, yoga therapy, self-help, and New Age teachings. Moreover, this discourse is the frame of reference in the conversations the travellers have among each other, and it also underlies their motivation to engage in activities from chakra cleansing and crystal healing to ten days of silence in a meditation retreat.

According to some scholars, Western culture has turned from an ideal of rationality to an ideal of the person as vulnerable, emotional and ill. Furedi for example contends that being emotionally damaged has become the well-established norm², and this, arguably, is part of the common ground the travellers share: everyone on their journey is considering him/herself as being in need of some sort of emotional healing, which is expected to be found in what is construed as the opposite of a disenchanting, unhappy Western world. They hence turn to Eastern medical and spiritual traditions, contrasting them with what is seen as estranged and mechanistic Western medicine.

²

Furedi, Frank. 2004. “Therapy Culture. Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age”. Routledge.

Arguably, while looking for “authentic” spiritual teachings, the “truths” the travellers agree with are generally well aligned with psychoanalytical ideas and centre around the notion of the necessity of confession and release to heal a wounded self. And although this psychologisation of spirituality can also be framed in terms of a neoliberal quest for self-enhancement³ and is linked to a transnational consumer culture⁴, in the context of travelling to India, it is the drawing on these discourses in this particular way that makes the travellers “Western”.

³ As for example in Lozanski, K., Lavrence, C., 2014. “This Is Not Your Practice Life: lululemon and the Neoliberal Governance of Self”. Volume 51, Issue 1, February 2014. 76–94

⁴ Jain, A., 2014. "Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture". Oxford University Press.