

# Lived Cosmologies and Objectified Commodities: Reinventing the Traditional Art of India in a World of Cultural Tourism

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## Abstract

This essay examines how the significance of ancient South Asian monuments is transformed when reframed by the practices of cultural tourism, which are grounded in the values of a modern, globalizing, economic cosmology. Ethnographic evidence collected on a visit to the archaeological park and museum at Sarnath, site of the Buddha's first discourse and home to some of the most celebrated masterpieces of ancient Indian sculpture, are here analyzed to support and illustrate a broader, social-constructivist argument about the representation of reality in Indian visual culture. I will argue that the version of 'reality' presupposed by modern economic practices, such as tourism, works to objectify ancient South Asian forms and meanings, previously precipitated out of older living practices, into reified, collectable entities. Such objects and their objectified meanings further contribute toward naturalizing and universalizing economically grounded projects of self-construction among the practitioners of an economic worldview, wherein the self is shaped by routines of production and consumption: I am what I do for a living and I am the goods—including here, the touristic experiences—that I collect. It is this economic cosmology that moves to the foreground when ancient Indian 'art' is re-presented and consumed in the form of tourism products. Meanwhile the cosmology of *dharma* is pushed into the background. I hope to persuade the reader that the 'cost' of doing this is too high to justify the narrow economic benefits.

*Key words:* Sarnath, cultural tourism in India, modernity, tradition, social construction of reality, spiritual tourism, cosmology, world-views

In the early twenty-first century, the ancient art of 'Incredible India' has been strategically deployed as an important commercial resource for the branding of India as a modular, international tourist destination (Figure 1). Because such destinations across the globe are being relentlessly re-made into variants of the same place (e.g., units of national or UNESCO 'world heritage'), the arts play a crucial—and ironically trivialized—role in providing the decorative exterior of a *visually* unique tourism product, attractive to sightseers.

The commercial commodification, collection and exhibition of ancient South Asian visual culture for touristic 'edutainment' (Urry 1990) has gradually unfolded over the past two and a half centuries on the heels of

**FIGURE 1:** Incredible India



scholarly discovery and objectification, itself intimately entwined with modern modes of analysis and classification that presuppose reality to consist of an aggregate of autonomous entities. S. P. Gupta's *Cultural Tourism in India* (2002) explicitly takes the next step, marrying scholarly objectification to the projects of commodification. The author achieves this in the form of an inventory, wherein he lists and judges widget-like units of heritage according to their potential for touristic exploitation.

What happens to the significance of ancient monuments — once mostly produced for political-*religious* purposes — when they are reprocessed through the frameworks of a globalizing, political-*economic* cultural order? Here I will examine this question in some depth using a small sample of ethnographic evidence I collected at Sarnath during the 2007-2008 tourist season in India.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that as the form and meaning (technically, the signifier and signified) of ancient works of art (and scholarly discourses about them), are deployed in service of cultural tourism, both are further objectified and fetishized, as they are remade into commodities. Meanwhile, through these new usages, once-living

political-religious layers of meaning are bumped up to an abstract level of meta-significance, similar to what Roland Barthes (1972) calls 'connotations' or 'second-order signs'. This activity – assisted by academic scholarship – empties them of living content so that they can be revalorized by the market. A static form of objectified meaning (i.e., a form that can be bought and sold) is thereby constructed, but portrayed *as if* it has been 'discovered' and 'liberated' from local contexts of living production and use. This inert, authoritative, thing-like form is the only form in which a semblance of local meaning can follow an ancient art object into an art collector's possession, a museum or an otherwise eminently useful Lonely Planet guidebook.

## Objectifying Culture

In the realm of authoritative modernist scholarship, the traditional art of India has been commonly framed by an implicit narrative that tells of a fertile antiquity, a high-water mark of classical greatness, followed by medieval ossification (not lacking in occasional bursts of greatness), followed by inevitable decline. The title of a classic monument of modernist scholarship sums up the story quite succinctly in the title: *The Wonder that Was India* (Basham 2004). Thus, many academics have had a blind spot when it comes to the living, traditional practices of image making and temple construction surviving in various parts of India. Simply by virtue of their temporal position within the modernist story, these traditions must be, by definition, either dead, hopelessly degenerate or inauthentic revivals.

This narrative also carries within it a self-fulfilling force. Even if India's traditional *dharma*-centric culture<sup>2</sup> is not actually dead, or maybe not even moribund, in practice, modernist institutions have mythically functioned *as if* it were. As a result, tourism, aided by scholarship and market-oriented practices of collection and museumization, portray the traditional art of India through the distorted lenses of what Deborah Root calls a 'taxidermy' effect (Root 1996). The institutions of cultural tourism offer for sale the ornamental exterior of a traditional culture after it has been mythically killed, hollowed out and restuffed for display. This is an artefact of modernist freedom. Under the knife of modernist dualism, form and content, the outer skin and inner organs, are liberated from their ancient, systemic interconnectedness, thus allowing the newly detached form to be restuffed with reinvented, *thing-like* values and significance – specifically those digestible by the market. Like a hunter's collection of stuffed

trophies, a modernist collection of Indian art may *look* the same on the outside, but peering beyond the conservationists' tricks and contexts of exhibition, one can see that its lifeblood has been symbolically drained and replaced by the 'real-world' circulation of currency.

This is not to say that India's *dharma*-centric visual culture has *really* been killed off by a triumphant modernity. It has just been displaced, shifted from foreground to background, where it continues to operate in domains of living practice *despite* the power of the newly dominant monetary-symbolic order, in which it is made to serve as meta-, or 'second-order' signs. Thus for instance, traditional temples and images continue to be produced, often with great skill and aesthetic refinement, by members of the Visvakarma communities of South India (Parker 2010). However, these are not institutionally classified as 'contemporary art' and 'contemporary artists'. Indeed, unlike their ancient ancestors, living Hindu temple builders and image makers are not officially classified as 'artists' at all. Their work falls under the bureaucratic purview of the All India Handicrafts Board and the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments departments, and decidedly *not* that of the Lalit Kala (fine arts) academy. This is not because contemporary temples and their makers are not literally contemporary. Of course they are. But the *mythical* narratives of modernity and their corresponding classificatory schemes reserve 'contemporary art' for supposedly 'creative' (i.e., novel or experimental), aesthetic fetishes made for exhibition in art museums, upscale galleries, and for sale to wealthy collectors. The higher status of 'contemporary art' – correlated to the higher social status of its cosmopolitan consumers – coincides with the mythical power and role of both the art objects and moneyed elites in objectifying the narrative form: temporal progress. These modern political-economic realities necessarily rest on the stuffed skins of vanquished, mythically obsolete 'traditions'. As Bruno Latour (1993) explains,

The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. 'Modern' is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished (Latour 1993: 10).

We humans have never simply allowed observable reality to overpower the force of a good story, and few have been more compelling

than the modernist narrative of linear progress and atomistic freedom. It is not that this mythology doesn't work. In fact, in the sense of generating material effects, desirable or not, it works in spades. But it works according to Latour, not because of its own self-conceptions, but because we have never really been modern at all: we have misleadingly imagined and acted upon reality *as if* it were an absolute aggregate of independent things, even though in the realm of observable fact – in the sense of relative, or relational, reality – it has always been an interconnected pattern of relational energies.

By the end of the 1970s it was becoming commonplace to recognize that traditional cultures themselves are modern inventions (e.g., Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Wagner 1981; Berger & Luckmann 1966). In the introduction to their classic work, *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger define the phenomenon:

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.... However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 1f)

These insights are forceful in light of a prevailing, and false, assumption that 'traditions' – artistic and otherwise – are, by definition, static and uncreative. Beginning in the Renaissance and picking up steam in the Enlightenment, tradition was implicitly co-created as a shadow side of the progress concept. Images of timeless traditions tacitly arose, side-by-side with the idea of creative progress. In this narrative, sovereign individuals, especially 'creative personalities', who are more prosaically understood as virtuous owners of private material and intellectual property, romantically struggled against the static lifeways of the unworthy masses to literally *make* history. In this sense, progress is an invented, ideological illusion, serving to legitimize the capitalist regimes of private property and individualized personhood that were historically emerging at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger usefully focus attention on the way that many reified traditions are, in fact, often not simply the inert expressions of timeless customs but creative adaptations of inherited forms to contemporary circumstances. However, because their concept of invention is still more-or-less grounded in a vision of

historical discontinuity, they underestimate the profound continuities that systemically link even the most seemingly novel practices of the moment with the momentum of vast networks of past practices, out of which they organically arise. Deeper insight potentially arises from recognizing that traditions – or better yet, to use a South Asian framing, the *remnants* or *traces* of past actions (*samskaras*) – are now, and always have been, perpetually framed and reframed by successive moments of the here and now.

By the late nineteenth century, the academic world increasingly absorbed the concept of tradition into the emerging concept of culture, derived from a metaphor of progressive organic growth. In *The Invention of Culture*, Roy Wagner explains how the modern empirical sciences have handled human social diversity in the past century by inventing – or more precisely, *objectifying* – differences as if they were the attributes of a reified entity summarized by this eminently modernist word, culture.

In anthropology it is necessary to proceed as if culture existed as some monolithic 'thing,' but for the purpose of demonstrating how it is that an anthropologist attains his comprehension of another people, it is necessary to realize that culture is a 'prop.' The relation that the anthropologist builds between two cultures – which in turn, objectifies and hence 'creates' those cultures for him – arises precisely from his act of 'invention,' his use of meanings known to him in constructing an understandable representation of his subject matter (Wagner 1981: 8-9).

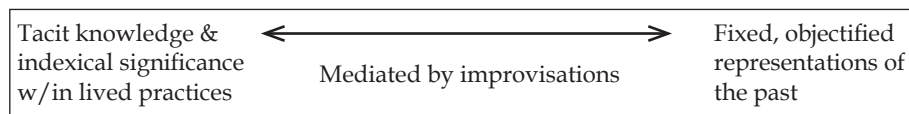
Wagner goes on to argue that the modern creation of culture takes the form of objectified things: accumulated 'contributions', discoveries, inventions, works of art, records, institutions, money and commodities of every sort. Accordingly, we tend to *mis-invent* the lives of non-modern, non-Westerners by describing their lives as if they, too, were doing 'culture', explicitly valorizing the creative objectification of forms (so-called religions, oral literature, economy, art, tools, folklore, etc.), over the observable tendency of non-modern others to primarily valorize *the doing of life itself*, through which forms are more-or-less incidentally precipitated. Thus, if these non-modern others were doing 'culture', then they were doing a pretty poor job of it, as gauged by the narrowly quantitative obsessions of our modern objectifying culture (as measured by GDP, economic growth, incomes, life-span, test scores, etc.), and they thus stood in great need of a paternalistic colonial power (or today, perhaps, the Peace Corps, the IMF or some earnest Euro-American non-governmental organization) to help them get on track toward the future.

Once we begin imagining time in objectified form, as if it were a mythical 'thing' occupying empty space, it is eventually possible to commodify it. Time is money. Just like money and so many other technologies that we have created for our own convenience, spatialized time gradually becomes a naturalized force in human life. When we start forgetting that spatialized time and money are instruments of a 'real world' that *we ourselves* are collectively creating, they stop becoming servants and increasingly become masters. And if a finite span of time is the concrete substance of a human life, then the commercialization of time amounts to the potential for commercializing absolutely everything, including human life itself, not to mention the arts of India. Building on the objectification of time, the accountant's-eye view of reality can then be extended to every dimension of value, perhaps most familiar to us today in relentless bureaucratic demands for goal setting, accountability, measurable outcomes, assessment strategies, and so on. Of course there can be no satisfactory end to such efforts because most of what humans really care about are *qualitative* values: wisdom, love, beauty, insight, relationships...all the things that make for quality of life. These, unlike time/money, do not come in the form of discrete units ready-made for counting.

Somewhat at odds with the claims of Hobsbawm and Ranger, Richard Davis (1997) has persuasively demonstrated that the reinvention of traditions—in the sense of appropriating and revaluing ancient objects in contexts of changing historical circumstances—is itself an ancient phenomenon in South Asia. Today, any given monument may *appear* to be defined by fixed, authoritative interpretations, but it is in fact surrounded by a multilayered halo of significance that has been accumulating and changing for as long as it has been in existence. Here I suggest that these complex meanings can be usefully imagined as if located along the continuum of increasing objectification that I have been discussing. At one end is the domain of living practice, always framed by the here and now. These sequential moments perpetually arise and vanish. Their significance is inevitably embedded in what people actually *do* more than in the objectified claims they make *about* what they are doing. That kind of meaning cannot be objectified in written form without misrepresenting it as something it is not. In a sense, of course, I will try to write about such meanings here, but the reader should be wary. Reading the menu can never substitute for eating the meal. The best I can do is use words to indexically point in the direction of this kind of significance, and try to take it into account in my own analysis. The other pole of the continuum is marked by the most routine, static, and reified

objectifications of meaning, especially as represented in authoritative written forms (as this essay aspires to do; the writer is no Houdini). In its most extreme form such a text would be an authoritative, definitive account that effectively terminates the unfolding of living meanings for all time (as this essay aspires *not* to do; the writer is also no Great Man). In mythically ending its social life, the author of an exhaustive work assumes total ownership of the object of interpretation. The middle of the continuum is marked by varying degrees of more-or-less explicit, contemporary reflections on established agreements, as mediated in improvisational, open-ended and spoken conversations. This refers to the domain of ethnographic evidence and living experiences I have here objectified in a written account.

With these limitations and qualifications now in place, it is time to offer an illustration, combining analysis with thick description of concrete events.



## A Tour of Sarnath

Sarnath is a major tourist destination located just outside the city of Varanasi, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It is where the Buddha is believed to have delivered his first discourse following his enlightenment, in which he set the *dharmachakra* ('wheel of law') in motion, articulating his four noble truths and the eightfold path. Thus, alongside Bodhgaya, in the state of Bihar, where the Buddha attained nirvana, Sarnath has long been one of the most important destinations for Buddhist pilgrims.<sup>4</sup> While it remains an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists, in the twentieth century it also became a major destination for art lovers as well, because of the wonderful collection of classical sculpture housed in the archaeological museum at the site.

In the autumn of 2007 my wife and I arranged a tour of Sarnath at the tourist office in the railway station upon our arrival in Varanasi. First I need to say a few things about the particular guide who happened to be available to us. Among the many sites we visited I have chosen here to focus on Sarnath specifically because of his exceptional value as an informant.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the bored routines served up by previous tour guides, this one impressed me as exceptionally alive, intellectually speaking, and genuinely intrigued by the world around him. Thus he was unusu-



ally frank, and openly critical of the totalizing force of monetary values that increasingly organize the experience of tourists and guides alike. For those familiar with the lively, critical, intellectual culture of Bengal, it might be meaningful to note that he is an educated Bengali. With his permission, I taped the tour and here I will quote many of his remarks at length, only lightly editing some of his spoken Indian-English in the interest of written English conventions. These passages do not naively claim to represent an 'authentic, native point of view' (which are highly problematic notions in any case), but they also do not simply reiterate my own analysis, which otherwise appears throughout this essay.

I asked our guide how he got into the guide business and he replied,

I answered an ad put out by the Ministry of Tourism. Some state governments also give licenses, but not here in UP[Uttar Pradesh]. It used to be, the police gave licenses. You just paid fees. Then it was taken over by the ASI [Archeological Survey of India], and after that it was taken by the Ministry of Tourism. You have to take a three-month course and a final exam given by the Ministry of Tourism. Now the ASI only provides a stamp endorsement. But there's been in-fighting for control. The police now are shut out of their fees and aren't happy about it.

They've been running this course a lot lately for no apparent reason. I ask them why they are making more guides when there are already so many of us and we can't find sufficient work as it is. They said, 'who are you to be asking these questions. You should know your place'. They say I'm a trouble-maker.

I asked if anyone could take the course.

If you're a college graduate in any subject you can apply. There's an entrance exam on general knowledge and Indian history followed by three months of coursework. The classes are poor quality. Many students never show up. In my group there were about 70 of us, but only about 40 or 45 of us ever showed up for any classes. The rest were already working for big hotels and tour agencies. In India there's always a front door and a back door. The front door means you have to take the exams and go through the classes. Back door means some other arrangements. Definitely you will get your license, regardless of exam scores or not showing up for classes. Just pay. After paying the license fee you can do whatever you like. All you have to do is pay a renewal fee from time to time. If you get in serious trouble you might have to pay a fine, but after the license, you can be as corrupt as you want!

It sounds as though licensing has a political side.

Politicians are the same everywhere! In our belief, these politicians will all be reborn as dogs! Here dogs see the carcass, they just run [to it]... garbage, disgusting things. They get kicked because of the bad things they must have done to be born as dogs.

I asked him what he did after getting his license.

After I graduated I found that this profession is all about shopping and greed. The restaurant owners and shopkeepers grabbed my arm and told me, 'you bring your clients here. I will give you a commission'. Indians today are very selfish. Just looking out for themselves. It's fine for people to make profit, but today they go for *maximum* exploitation. They see each foreigner as a possible solution to *all* of their profits, not just some. At first I thought, OK, a reasonable commission is OK, but what I couldn't go along with was the inflated prices—50, 70, 100 times as much as what I knew these things usually sell for! And the constant lying about what things are made from—silk, *pashmina*, gold, silver, sandalwood, precious stones, whatever.... It's terrible, just awful! The government shops are just as bad! Probably worse! Fixed prices! It's especially bad for the Japanese tourists. They're too polite to question. It is totally shameful! And then when there are such big profits, there is so much fighting between tour guides and shop owners, and restaurants and hotels...oh my...It's the same everywhere! The only difference is that the *amount* of money being raked in by the big, expensive hotels is so much more than the smaller hotels. Some people are just becoming rich beyond belief!

'What's the matter with that?' I asked, 'Most Americans think it is good to see people getting rich.'

(He shook his head solemnly.) Here it causes problems. *Big* problems. There are a *billion* people in this country, but this system only creates big profit for a few people. The richest man in the world is not Bill Gates, he is an Indian living in Bombay! He's building a forty story house on the beach! In your country you might say, OK, but here in India it's immoral. And besides, it creates social problems. In this country, everybody wants to show off their wealth. It is all about pride. 'What does this other fellow have...I must also have', and they get greedy. They want more and more just so they can be superior to their rivals. The good side of this job is educational. The other, dark side, is the shopping side that is killing the profession. These markets are controlled by powerful people. *Selling* has even gone behind, and cheating has come to the front. They are charging 100 times, everyone knows, even the government does it, and nobody does anything.... That is the dark side. But if there is a life, both sides will be there.

'If it is all so corrupt', I asked him, 'how is it that you are still a tour guide?'

If you work through a hotel or a tour agency, it's all about shopping. Black money. So I just work on my own. I have only two grown daughters and few expenses, so I refused to play the game. They say I'm a trouble-maker, so I don't get much business. I get by... I like meeting people from other countries. But shopping has become compulsory, first and foremost! I am not useful to them, the business people. They want to extract the *maximum* from each tourist. *Maximum* exploitation! At what cost? You're inviting visitors. They

are your guests. Is this the way to treat them? If you want to be successful in this business you have to forget your soul. Cheating, black money, this is what India has become! My wife complains, 'the police are calling you...so many complaints and letters'. But luckily I have a small family, so I can survive.

## The Chaukhandi Monument

Our guide insisted that we start the tour at the ruins of the fifth-century Chaukhandi *stupa* on the outskirts of Sarnath. A Buddhist *stupa* is typically a hemispherical mound, ideally housing relics, and designed to be used in rituals of circumambulation. Today the Chaukhandi *stupa* is part of an archaeological park. It consists of a terraced mound of bricks topped by an octagonal building, said to commemorate a sixteenth-century visit by the Mughal emperor Humayun (Figure 2). According to our guide, this *stupa* originally memorialized the location where the Buddha met up with his former companions in asceticism.

Echoing Hobsbawm and Ranger's insights into the invention of tradition, our guide explained that when we look at the ancient brick part of the *stupa*, nothing that we can actually see is ancient.

Nothing here is as it seems! No Gupta bricks can be seen. Everything that you see is new construction. The bricks *inside* are original, but the outside has been completely covered using new bricks. I've seen it with my own eyes!

Because the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has always valued reconstruction over conservation – consistent with the significance of ancient monuments to the tourism industry – a substantial number of ancient monuments like the Chaukhandi *stupa* have been reconstructed to the point that they really are no longer quite what they are purported to be. Instead, they have been remade into meta-signs, serving as *representations* of themselves, which makes them into representations of representations.<sup>6</sup> Our guide explained that the octagonal structure atop the *stupa* was made by Akbar in 1585, to commemorate a dramatic event in the life of his father, the emperor Humayun, in which he narrowly escaped the hot pursuit of his enemies by hiding at this spot. Without the protective blessing of this sacred site, the young Mughal dynasty, founded only decades earlier by Babur, Humayun's father, would have been nipped in the bud. Thus, the monument represents a pivotal point in the history of Mughal North India.<sup>7</sup>

This narrative, as presented by our guide, does conform to historical evidence concerning Sher Khan's 1539 defeat of Humayun's forces at Chausa, (a town actually closer to Patna, but generally close enough to

**FIGURE 2:** Chaukhandi *stupa*, fifth century C.E., topped by Humayun memorial, sixteenth century C.E.



the neighbourhood of Sarnath to be plausible). However, the guide's account is not based on any other surviving historical records, and must not be taken literally. With some modesty, he seemed to be including himself when he said,

I like this business for sentimental reasons. I like people. I like telling the stories. We Indian people are great storytellers. We are so over-excited! So expert! It becomes impossible to tell the difference between what really happened and what we made up! Tour guides are big storytellers! The differences between them are like cinema. You can have the same story, but if it's a Bengali movie it'll be totally different from Bombay or Madras.

The inscription above the door of the Mughal structure tells us that Govardhan (a Hindu name), son of Raja Todarmal (Akbar's regional governor), built the tower in Hijri 996 (1588 C.E.) to commemorate a visit by Humayun (Sahni 1982-1983: 13). Our guide's dramatic story of Humayun's desperate flight from his enemies finds support neither in the inscription, nor in any other known historical sources. The character of the interior bricks, fragments of Gupta sculpture found at the site, combined with a test hole dug through the monument down to virgin soil by archaeologists, combine to suggest that the *stupa* itself was first

constructed in the fifth century C.E. It is not unreasonable to assume that it replaced earlier structures, likely made out of perishable materials, but no physical evidence of those has survived. Its specific connection to an event in the life story of the Buddha perpetuates the mid-nineteenth-century deductions of Alexander Cunningham, who persuasively identified the monument from its location and significance, by drawing on the accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang who visited Sarnath in the seventh century (see Sahni 1982-1983).

When Cunningham first excavated the site in 1835 he reported that it was locally known as *Lauri-ka-kodan*, or 'Lauri's leap', in reference to its significance as the site of the death of a member of the Ahir sub-caste named Lauri. This event is otherwise absent in the historical record. If, however, a compelling narrative could be unearthed in association with the old name, it *could* potentially resonate with the market values governing touristic representations of the site. For now it remains a loose thread waiting to be re-woven into the story of the site.

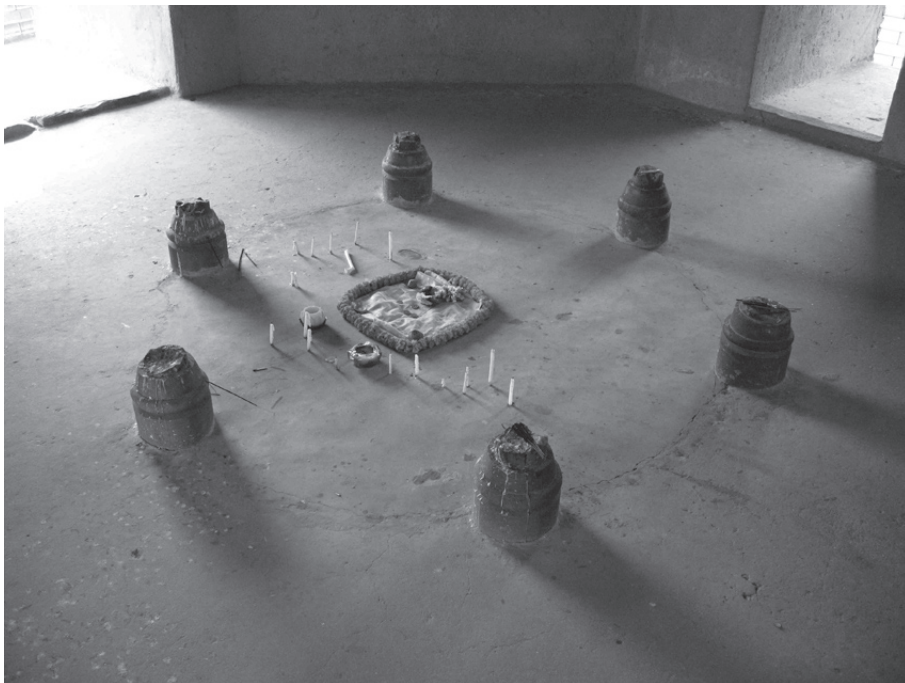
Cunningham also noted a damaged statue of the Hindu goddess Kali installed on a small platform at the base of the *stupa* where local villagers regularly sacrificed goats. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that local villagers used this site for blood sacrifices long before it was appropriated to serve Buddhist memory and practice. Blood sacrifices evidently continued at the Chaukhandi *stupa* in 1922 when D. R. Sahni wrote one of the first official guidebooks on Sarnath for the ASI (Sahni 1982-1983: 14). However, sometime during the subsequent twentieth century the practice was discontinued. Today the ASI discourages all acts of *puja* (a form of ritual worship that entails offerings to a deity) at archaeological monuments. The Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya, not under ASI control, offers an interesting contrast, where ancient, historically important works of 'art' are allowed to receive messy, traditional gestures of hospitality, including applications of gold leaf, a practice popular among Southeast Asian visitors. But elsewhere, conservation-minded professionals generally consider the common vegetarian offerings of flowers, fruits, flames, grains, sweets and *kumkum* (a red powder typically made with turmeric) too much to tolerate. The empowered 'remnants of the sacrifice' (*prashad*) that acts of *puja* are designed to generate, inevitably attract insects, birds and rodents. And of course, the blood sacrifices, that today continue to be popular among meat-eating communities in some parts of India, go far beyond what the tourist industry, in consonance with the cosmopolitan authorities of the ASI, are willing to tolerate.

Nevertheless, opportunistic, informal *puja* practices still occur at

the Chaukhandi *stupa*, despite ASI control and the occasional visits of tourists. When we entered the Mughal structure at the *stupa*'s summit, we encountered a makeshift altar and the remnants of a *puja* that had recently been conducted at the centre of the interior space (Figure 3). Our guide was unable to explain what we were seeing, except to suggest that it was an informal event conducted without any official knowledge or permission from the ASI.

I chanced upon a visually similar *puja* in progress amid the ruins of a Jama Masjid, located inside the Junagadh Fort in Gujarat (Figure 4). At the centre of the mosque, a group of young men had prepared a bed of rice and fruits in the shape of a circular altar, marked with *kumkum* and augmented with burning candles and incense. A singed advertisement for an automobile of some kind lay next to the altar. I asked our Gujarati guide what was going on and he replied that people do this for good luck. He drew my attention to small groups of people coming and going from the *mihrab* (an arched niche in the wall of the mosque facing Mecca) who were also requesting good luck. At the center of the *mihrab* the open face of a lotus arising from an overflowing pot, or *kalasa*, is carved in low relief. This is a conventional Hindu motif, here

**FIGURE 3:** Remnants of an unauthorized *puja* performed inside the Humayun memorial atop the Chaukhandi *stupa*



deployed in a Muslim place of worship, drawing attention to the fact that the political lines separating Hindu and Muslim today in South Asia were not so sharp at one time. I asked if these people were Muslims and the guide said no, both Hindus and Muslims come here and do the same thing, it is just about good luck.

The Chaukhandi *stupa* illustrates the historical layering of forms, meanings and meta-meanings discussed in the introduction. At one end of the continuum, the site consists of material traces of ancient Buddhist practices used in the contemporary practices of tourism and opportunistic *puja*. It likewise represents experienced events and political signaling associated with the lives of Humayun, Akbar and local subordinates in the sixteenth century, and beyond these, the lives and stories told about the unknown Ahir Lauri, the specific practical aims and sacrificial actions of Kali's devotees, and more recently, the implicit values and experiences of unknown contemporary agents who have

**FIGURE 4:** Unauthorized *puja*, Jama Masjid, Junagadh Gujarat



claimed the site as a presumably potent space in which to pursue their own aims through impromptu, unofficial rituals. All of these must be understood as the few tips of a vast iceberg of interconnected ephemeral moments (called *dharma*s in Indian philosophy) – arising and fading away – among which some trace (*samskara*) endures into the present moment. Over the past 2,000 years, this site has no doubt been interpreted in the actions of an uncounted series of now-vanished contexts of practice. At the other end of the continuum are more-or-less fixed, conventional authoritative meanings, objectified in scholarly texts and didactic signs posted at the site. In between are the relatively routine, but also to some extent improvisational, representations offered by our guide, who mixes a living, economic frame of value (i.e., selling edutainment to visitors) with an objectified collection of conventional, more-or-less authoritative, agreements. Any informal *puja* routines occurring at the site on a regular basis would also belong to the middle zone of this spectrum.

Presumably, the ancient signs of sacred usage that were already visible at the site in the sixteenth century must have partly motivated its appropriation by Hindu agents of Emperor Akbar. The construction of the octagonal structure materially re-presents the site – which itself was already a Buddhist representation – in a context of Mughal significance. Both of these layers of representation are today included in the meta-representations offered in commodified form by our tour guide. Moreover, it would be safe to say that those who are today using the site for their own opportunistic ritual purposes are also well aware of its semiotic connections with Buddhism, Humayun, the ASI and cultural tourism, and yet through their actions they subversively – if not even illegally – reinterpret the site through practices representing alternative, religiously organized values. And of course one must not overlook the fact that the words I write here constitute an ironic act, by meta-representing these meta-representations.

Nevertheless, with regard to truth-values, not all meta-representations are created equal. The guide's story of Humayun's narrow escape is thinly motivated by historical evidence, but more so by the values of the market, in which the imperative of sales necessarily trump those of truth. The scholarly story-line may legitimately claim greater verisimilitude, but it does so at the expense of the drama, interest and coherence of the tour guide's narrative. To generalize a bit further, in contexts where the values of the free market prevail, the values of scholarship are corrupted.



## The Sarnath Museum and Archaeological Park

After the Chaukhandi *stupa*, our guide escorted us to the main archaeological site at the centre of Sarnath where the museum is located. Aggressively designed political/religious posters supporting the Falun Gong, outlawed in China, and the Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, lined walls and fences along the dusty roads leading to the booking office. Because the site itself is a *tirtha*, or 'ford' facilitating one's crossing from this world to the next, major Jain and Hindu temples also operate there, alongside much more numerous Buddhist structures, both ancient and modern. Entrance to the archaeological park costs two rupees, but there is now a special foreigner fee of 250 rupees per person. I asked our guide what he thought about the new fee structure and got an unexpected earful of opinion.

To be frank, it's a racist policy. How do they know? If you look Indian you'll pay 2 rupees, otherwise they will charge you 250 because of your white skin. You could be from anywhere in the world, any nationality, it's all a matter of how you look to them. But this kind of mark-up isn't just the government. It's what *everybody* does when they go after tourists! I think if you're going to invite people to your country, you shouldn't do this. It's shameful. Instead of going for *maximum* exploitation of each tourist, just go for *ordinary* profit! Then they'll come back and encourage others too. But when foreigners find out how much they're being taken advantage of, who'd blame them for not feeling good? I think this profession is about sentiments. I like history. I like meeting and talking with interesting people. But for most of them (pointing with an expression of disgust to the tour buses and souvenir stands lining the street) it's 100 per cent money.

He then pointed out the newly finished Tourist Reception Centre located near the museum.

It's run by the state government. Lots of money goes into it. It's been open for a while now, but the gate is locked. It's got a big staff. But even if you go in when the gate is unlocked you won't ever find anybody inside! This is just about money and political favours. It's open now, but you won't ever find anybody inside.

Looking around the vicinity of the tourist office and seeing various buses bringing in groups of tourists speaking Korean, Japanese and French, as well as Indian families and school children, I asked our guide whether he found foreign tourists different from Indian tourists.

There are so many different kinds of tourists. The ones coming just for holiday, just recreation, they're always impatient. After half an hour they say, 'my head hurts, you talk too much, here, take your whole fee but just don't make me listen anymore!'

A bit later I asked more narrowly if foreign backpacker tourists are any different from the ones staying in expensive hotels. He answered,

Backpacker tourists are interested in the *ghats* along the river in Varanasi. But hardly any rich tourists or even backpackers have much patience. After 45 minutes they say 'stop, my head is hurting'. They will pay the whole half-day fee just to get me to stop talking! But backpackers don't take the services of tour guides much. They're usually just as impatient as the rich people. It's rare to get a tourist like you who is really interested in anything.

As we watched, determined touts, souvenir sellers, and beggars, many of them children, flocked to the bus doors as the foreigners emerged, ignoring the busloads of Indian visitors. They pursued the tourists aggressively – holding out upturned hands, strings of beads, tiny images, postcards and booklets – until their quarry escaped into the refuge of the fenced museum grounds. Souvenir carts lining the main road near the museum provided calmer shopping opportunities. Aside from the ubiquitous beads, soapstone elephants and shells, most of the items spoke of local aesthetics, specific to Sarnath (Figure 5). These prominently included small hand-carved replicas of the Sarnath Ashokan capital (dated to the third century B.C.E and adopted as the emblem of the Indian Republic soon after independence) and representations of famous Gupta-period sculptures of the Buddha. The carts also offer film and batteries in support of the tourists' photographic activities.

As we stood in line at the booking office, our guide warned us that we wouldn't be allowed to take photographs or videotape in the museum. When asked why not, he replied:

You used to, but now it's all a commercial matter for the ASI. Photography is absolutely prohibited. If you pay 5,000 rupees to the office in Delhi you can get permission to photograph in any museum you want! I say if it isn't allowed for some good reason, like terrorism, then it just shouldn't be allowed, but for them it's just another way to get more money.

He continued,

But if you really want to take photos, we can arrange it here, with sufficient payment.

In India we don't really believe in rules, we believe in options. There are always at least two ways to do anything, the front door and the back door. You foreigners wouldn't know how to use the back door, but we do this all the time in India. Here we have lots of rules, but no regular implementation.

Susan Sontag (1977) originally provided the basis of a useful framework for thinking about touristic photography and souvenir collecting.

**FIGURE 5:** Sarnath souvenir stands

Sontag argues that photographs—and, I would add, souvenirs—provide tangible evidence that something exists, or did exist, despite its immediate absence (Sontag 1977). For instance, when I was teaching onboard the *Semester at Sea* voyage in 2008 I overheard a fragment of a conversation in the hallway in which a young woman behind me said to her companion, 'I was just looking at the pictures we took at the Taj and I just realized what a good time I had'.

In English we are oddly required to speak of experiencing as if it were tangible property, alienating 'it' as some kind of 'thing' that I 'have' or 'had', despite the obvious fact that 'it' is not any of these 'things', or indeed, any kind of tangible thing at all. These peculiar habits of speech and thought—parallel to the illusory spatialization/objectification of time in English speech—become naturalized through the force of largely unconscious routines and agreements. Everybody simply does it, without critical reflection. In playing my socialized role as a sovereign consumer, freely exercising my market preferences—or in other words, performing the actions normal for a modern, possessive individual—my touristic photographs, like the souvenirs I buy, objectify my experience in a tangible form that I literally *can* 'have', and include among my personal property. Tangible form makes the consumer experience

**FIGURE 6:** American college students performing for the camera in front of the Taj Mahal, Agra



'real'. My souvenirs and photographs, which I personally possess in vast abundance, objectify my unique personal history/identity, and flatter my fictional sense of being an independent individual. In writing these words, I compound the flattery through clever critical verbiage that exposes my predicament, but offers no real escape from it.

This system of touristic practice is further clarified by considering the way the Semester at Sea students immediately deployed their photographs as soon as they returned to the ship. On page after page of their social networking sites I saw uploaded photographs representing how much fun they 'had' on shore, thereby portraying themselves as objects of envy to their peers back home. One specific kind of staged photograph reappeared over and over. Obviously borrowing from the iconography of youth-oriented ads—especially those selling highly caffeinated energy drinks—groups of students repeatedly photographed themselves as if leaping for joy, using the Taj Mahal as a background (Figure 6). They obviously took special pains to capture the moment when everyone in the group was airborne, smiling, laughing, flailing limbs, pumping fists, or otherwise exhibiting extreme signs of radical fun. Later, as we sailed east, I saw many similar images of students

leaping in front of other bucket-list world heritage monuments: Angkor Wat, the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. The world was their oyster, representationally speaking: a backdrop for collecting thing-like 'experiences' shaping an enviable and individualized consumer-self. Among their countless pictures, the leaping photographs in particular serve as brilliant, reinterpreted pop-culture guerilla action: energetic counterparts of the lifeless, modular uniformity generated in part by 'World Heritage Site' designation.

Status as a 'World Heritage Site' is eagerly sought from UNESCO by governments on behalf of their local tourism industries (Smith 2003: 105-116), but it operates to transform distinct places in the world into variants of the same place, underwritten by the homogenizing economic values driving globalization, in many of its facets. And yet these staged youthful photographs also capture, with astonishing precision, the degree to which museumization and commodification *drain* the life of ancient monuments while simultaneously *fueling* the life-blood of markets and market-persons, that is, 'economic man' in his roles of production, consumption and the accumulation of property.<sup>8</sup>

## Masterpieces of the Sarnath Museum

As we approached the archaeological museum in Sarnath, we could see the polished Ashokan capital through the open doors of the museum even as we stood out on the street (Figure 7). Our guide took the occasion to criticize the location of the capital: 'See, that's our national emblem. You can see it from right here. It'd be so easy for any terrorist to just drive up and shoot it!'

In these brief remarks he channelled a fully contemporary halo of meaningful connotations surrounding this sculpture that would make it a meaningful target of terrorism. Material signs of this twenty-first century problem are ubiquitous in the tourist experience these days. A particularly ironic example of this can be seen in a photograph taken at Sanchi in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in 2007, where an armed guard sits beneath a shrine protecting what is believed to be a descendant of the Buddha's original Bodhi tree, planted by the Sri Lankan Mahabodhi Society in the mid-twentieth century (Figure 8).

Our guide continued:

In the museum I usually show three things: the lion capital, the Bodhisattva from Mathura and the seated fifth-century Buddha. These three are true art. Not craft.

**FIGURE 7:** Ashokan Lion Capital, Sarnath Museum, third century B.C.E.



What is the difference?

Art is alive. Anyone who sees will recognize it. And every time you see it, it seems different, but still alive. A work of craft is dead. It's just mechanical. Making something for commercial reasons.

Here I will elaborate on two of these three images in detail. In keeping with museum etiquette our guide remained silent in the museum, and so I do not have any explanations from him to offer here. My aim is to show that a fully contemporary reading of these images need not rest entirely in an objectified, antiquarian scholarship that treats them as if they continue to exist in their own ancient past. Despite their present *dharma* as museumized aesthetic fetishes, it is still possible to respond

to these images – even in a museum setting – as complex signs emanating aestheticized *spiritual* values, consistent with, even if inevitably not identical to, those apparently circulating in the environments in which they were initially produced and used. That said, I am obviously not able to transcend my own space-time, nor the limitations of my medium of expression in these pages. After writing them down, the interpretations I offer here become static objectifications of significance. They cannot, by their very nature, become lived practice.<sup>9</sup> At best they can only serve as indexical signs, pointing in that direction.

**FIGURE 8:** Uniformed man with gun sitting under the Bodhi tree at Sanchi



## The Ashokan Lion Capital

Four back-to-back lions facing the four directions stand atop a drum bearing four wheels of law (*dharmachakras*) located directly beneath their feet. In the intermediate directions, four naturalistic animals, bull, stallion, elephant and lion, all carved in high relief, walk around the drum in the clockwise direction of ritual circumambulation. The drum rests on a lotus stylized in the form of an overflowing pot. Anyone familiar with Persian sculpture of the fifth century B.C.E. will recognize the Persian style of the lotus and the four lions; however, the four animals in relief are rendered in a radically different, more naturalistic style, common to local South Asian aesthetic preferences. Originally the four lions supported a large wheel of *dharma* on their backs. Fragments of this wheel still exist in the museum collection. This capital once rested atop a pillar bearing the inscription of an edict issued in the third century B.C.E. by emperor Ashoka, warning monks and nuns against fomenting divisions in the Buddhist community. The Ashokan pillar at Sanchi, bearing a similar capital, announced the same imperial warning. Apparently, the diversity of views and practices that had emerged among the followers of the Buddha during the centuries following his death had now become a problem of state for the emperor Ashoka, who had appropriated the teachings of the Buddha – by that time already significantly objectified, if not yet solidly hardened, in textual and doctrinal formalizations – to become the unifying ideology of an imperial project of non-violent conquest (*dharmavijaya*). In so doing, Ashoka constructed a foundation for what later became ever more solidly objectified into the institutionalized forms that are today classified as 'Buddhist'. Already in these inscriptions we see the emperor at work struggling against the kind of organic differentiations that naturally arise out of diverse life-experiences and interpretations in favour of a firmly sedimented, unitary formulation of thought and practice. Monumental sculptural forms and inscriptions announced *in stone* effectively express an imperial aspiration to make this system of objectifications as solid as possible.<sup>10</sup>

At one level, the capital obviously lends itself to political readings, most obviously in its twentieth-century adaptation as official emblem of an independent Indian nation. Because Ashokan inscriptions are found throughout the Indian sub-continent, Ashokan symbols can be effectively deployed today to assert, on virtually every official document and unit of currency, that the modern Indian 'nation' is not a recent artefact produced by British colonial power and its modernizing projects (which it arguably is), but a restoration of an ancient political entity bearing a



history going back more than 2,000 years. The Persian-style lions are ancient Achaemenian (559-330 B.C.E.) symbols of royal authority while the naturalistic animals below enact a subordinate role through the visual logic, above : below :: centre : periphery :: motionless : moving :: foreign power (spiritually emanating) : local power (coarsely rotating). It should be noted that in identifying himself with signs of foreignness here, the emperor Ashoka is not positioning himself as alien to the Indian subcontinent, but as 'foreign' in the sense of his identification with a remote and transcendent creative power.

This reading does not preclude another at a more conventional, religious level, in which the pillar represents one of many forms used in Indian visual culture for the axis of the universe, the four open-mouthed lions depict the Buddha's teachings, often called the 'lion's roar', projecting to the four quarters of space. The Buddha himself is known in epigraphy as the 'Lion of the Shakya clan'. The four circumambulating animals all have conventional narrative meanings in Buddhist tradition. For instance, the Buddha entered his mother's womb in the form of a white elephant; his 'great departure' from his parents' palace is signified by his loyal horse, Kanthaka. The French scholar Alfred Foucher (1963) argues that the bull represents the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha, because both events occurred in the month of Vaishak (April-May) under the zodiacal sign of Taurus, the Bull. Alternatively, others have plausibly argued that these animals signify the subordination of Hindu deities: the bull-riding Shiva, the elephant-riding India, the horse-riding Surya and the lion-riding Goddess. Others have argued that these are totemic animals, signifying social divisions loyal to Ashoka. Variation in the public significance of these signs in ancient Indian visual culture suggests that all these conventional readings—and no doubt many more—could have occurred to South Asian viewers during the past 2,000 years. Even if the team of sculptors who carved these animals shared a narrow range of meanings in mind, it hardly makes any difference. Those and the broader contexts that supported them faded without record. Moreover, the lexical components of a visual statement such as this have a public life far beyond the subjective intentions of the authors. For those who believe in the authenticity/author/authority model of meanings, in which authentic meanings are the private, intellectual property of an author, inserted into the form by the author's authoritative 'intentions', these ancient conventional meanings pose an impossible problem. There are just too many of them, and their significance is just too public, to be reduced to the singular authority of an imaginary author.

Yet another, spiritual/aesthetic level of potential significance, the three main components of the composition indexically point toward an implicit creative power, hidden deep within the linear axis of the pillar. The overflowing lotus cascades from it, as if from a hidden *bindu* (generative point), the animals and wheel revolve around it, and the four lions project from it. Of course, all this is aesthetic affect. There is no literal motion or emergence happening, but an artful configuration that reads *as if* a life-stream – call it nectar, the creative flow of a celestial Ganges – projecting from the singular point (*bindu*) residing at the heart of the universe, also emanates from within the calm centre of this pillar. While such creative, living power is often described in Indian texts as ambrosia (*amrit*), juice (*rasa*), or honey (*madhu*), here the open mouths of the lion remind us that it is also sometimes represented in an audible form, as *aum*, or *nada*, the creative spiritual 'sound' extolled in the Vedas.

I insist on classifying this level of reading as spiritual rather than religious because this hidden power is not the intellectual property of any of the world's many religions, nor is it simply reducible to any of the conventional symbols in which it has been objectified. Call it Spirit, Nectar, Living Water, the Word, the unspoken Dao, or nameless Name, it is the common source of all that exists. It is the one great power through which everything comes into being, in a process of differentiation, through which this singular Power temporarily generates the illusion of being many, by vibrating at an almost infinite range of frequencies and combinations, but to which everything, in the end, eventually returns.

On the other hand, if one firmly believes in one of the many dualistic, discontinuous cosmologies commonly identified with modernist rationality, then of course there is no compelling reason to believe in the oneness of this ultimate spiritual power. Instead, we may be led to believe that there are many different forces existing in the universe that differ in their essential nature. Indeed, the groundwork for this modern secular vision is already provided by the dualism presupposed in Western monotheism, in which creator and created are imagined as if independent of each other. Transposed to the level of routine modernist lifeways, such belief systems pragmatically realize themselves in a constellation of adversarial commonsense practices, in which mythically independent units of reality are posed in competition for survival, competition for market share, competition for scarce resources, competition for political advantage, agonistic/contractual relationships, cost-benefit analysis, an adversarial legal system, *ad* (almost) *infinitum*.

## The Seated Buddha Turning the Wheel of Law

We quickly walked through the galleries past many wonderfully carved Buddha images that had been largely nullified, from an aesthetic perspective, by the addition of crudely restored noses, until we arrived at the far end of an adjacent hall to examine a much-celebrated seated Buddha image dating from the fifth century (Figure 9). Thankfully this particular nose remains in the broken condition in which it was found. The enlightened Buddha depicted in this image exudes the perfection of introspective peace (called *santa rasa*, or saintly juice/ taste, in ancient Indian aesthetic theory). He sits in a lotus posture, his left hand pointing inward, to his heart, the right pointing outward, with thumb and finger joined together in a conventional gesture known as *dharmachakra pravartana mudra* (the gesture of putting the wheel of law in motion). The unification of the inward-facing left hand and the outward-facing right hand could be more concretely described as a gesture of 'outwardly sharing what has been revealed *within*' (i.e., in the spiritual heart of the Buddha's meditation). The disciples, deer and forthcoming wheel of *dharma*, carved beneath his seat as if emerging out of the background, specify the particular event: the Buddha's first discourse at the deer park here at Sarnath, through which he is popularly said to have set the wheel of *dharma* in motion. In this, his first discourse, he explained the four noble truths concerning the anxious and miserable predicaments of ordinary human existence and the eightfold path, a practical method, culminating in successful, one-pointed meditation ('right mindfulness' and ultimately, 'right concentration'), through which one can attain liberation from them.

It has often been noted that his form is composed of sculptural equivalents of metaphors current in the literature of the Gupta period: his face is the full moon, his chest, that of a lion, his shoulders, the trunk of an elephant, his eyes, lotus buds, his eyelids, lotus petals, and so on. The lotus eyes bear a large burden of the expressive work. They are neither open nor shut, but indicative of the Buddha's role as a mediator between the inner worlds and the outer one. Moreover, the Buddha's way is the middle path, neither entirely renouncing the outer world nor entirely living within it. So long as he has a body, he operates in both realms.

Many other images of the Buddha mark the all-important centre for one-pointed concentration, located between the two eyebrows (*ajna chakra*, the two-petal lotus, or third eye) in the form of a singular dot (*bindu*, *bindi*) or in some cases as a spiral knob. Two physical eyes look

out on the realm of dualism and relative reality while a subtle, single eye opens inward at this point in the body onto realms of oneness and absolute reality. In the Buddha images of the Gupta period, this point is not always marked by an explicit symbol, but by an introspective expression. Like the motionless hub of the wheel of *dharma*, the point between the Buddha's eyes anchors the centre of the large circular halo, swirling with the emergent forms of a lotus creeper flanked by rows of jewels.

Even though it is my eyes making contact with the form, it is my tactile sense that responds to the implied synaesthesia, so typical of much ancient Indian sculpture. No rippling sinews or anatomical definitions

**FIGURE 9:** Buddha delivering his first discourse at the deer park at Sarnath, Gupta period, fifth century C.E.



disturb the soft volumes of repose, welling outward to form the chest, arms, legs, cheeks, toes. The body appears nude unless one notices the edges of the robe around his neck, wrists and ankles. It forms a sensuous, unbroken surface stretched over a body composed of luminous substance, belonging to heavenly worlds, and perfected by the practice of yoga. His seeming weightlessness, radiant halo and flying attendants should dispel any doubts that this seated Buddha represents a luminous body belonging to a subtle (*akashic*) realm.

A richer appreciation of these qualities begins to form when we remember that the relevant terms for the body, *kosa* or *kaya*, bear connotations similar to the English words, sheath, or envelope. Both ancient Indian sculpture and philosophy treat the body as a layered structure, similar to an onion, in which the coarse, ephemeral body of bone and flesh envelops successively more durable and subtle bodies within, consisting of luminous energies vibrating at frequencies far too fine for detection by the physical senses, or by any of the scientific instruments that we routinely use nowadays to extend our perceptive capacities. Each coarser layer of the body is successively objectified by the relatively more subtle, real layer of energies it contains, thus, even though there is no mind-body or spirit-matter dualism here, one can speak of relative *degrees* of reality and durability. In this framework the biological body is the most ephemeral, and thus the least real, of the lot.

The common structure of binary oppositions: spirit/matter, mind/body, sacred/secular, not to mention true/false, right/wrong, good/evil and so on, must be set aside to appreciate this image. Consistent with monistic philosophical representations of reality, South Asian visual culture likewise portrays reality as if it consisted of unified continua rather than binary dualisms. The less real, more transitory layers – the physical *sthula sharir* in modern Hindi – can't be sustained very long, and must be re-grown over and over, life after life, while the inner layers of the body – the exquisitely fine *sukshma sharir* shown in this seated image of the Buddha – endures for eons. Deeper within the core of the subtle body are even finer coverings, leading toward that which is eternal and immortal, called by Buddhists *dharma kaya* and by certain Hindus, *anandamaya kosha* ('bliss-sheath' among other things).

Textual evidence indicates that intellectually minded Buddhist and Hindu philosophers have entertained endless disagreements over what, if anything, these sheaths ultimately contain: the existence, or not, of a soul, or God. By all accounts, the Buddha himself remained rigorously silent when people tried to entangle him in intellectual debates on this

issue. At our level—the low level of intellectual, *relative*, knowledge (*jna*)—the intellectual articles of faith underwriting sectarian divisions are constantly cultivated in opposition to the supposedly errant views of those who see things differently. However, surviving evidence of the Buddha's answer to such debates was to note that we have been shot with a poison arrow. There is no doubt that we will certainly suffer, lose all the stuff and prestige we have wasted our lives accumulating, and then die. The physician has offered us the medicine: follow the eight-fold path, still the mind, attain right concentration, and directly perceive absolute, unchanging Truth and Reality (*prajna*). At that point, useless debates about the existence or non-existence of the soul, gods, heavens, hells and other metaphysical imaginings are not so much resolved as they are simply dissolved. We recognize them as a tiny puddle of irrelevant, linguistic distractions when face-to-face with the ocean of Reality itself.

As I have been arguing here, interpretation is embedded in living practices as much as it is in words: while my wife and I—socialized in the egocentric practices of independent and individualistic selfhood—engaged in our routine, solitary practices of silent museum gazing,<sup>11</sup> two older Indian women removed their shoes, bowed and pressed their hands together in the gesture of *pranam* before the seated Buddha image. Other noisy Indian groups passed through the galleries talking with each other, largely oblivious to their surroundings, enacting the museum visit as a sociocentric occasion for building meaningful relationships and shared histories with their companions. I also saw an elderly Indian woman reach her hands toward the Buddha image's feet and raise them to her eyes. This act, along with the *pranams*, addressed the object not as an aesthetic fetish, as I was doing, but as the acknowledgement of a living spiritual presence worthy of respect and hospitality. But inside the museum, the surveillance of the ASI exerts a powerful force on the interpretation of the seated fifth-century Buddha as a 'work of fine art', thus, small gestures of *pranam* are about as close to *puja* as visitors could get away with. However, in light of the relentlessly economic values organizing today's art worlds, perhaps even this small gesture is enough to subversively reframe the object as an embodiment of an alternative constellation of values.

The several interpretations I have just offered do not come anywhere near exhausting the potential field of meanings and contextual associations that can arise through contemplation of these two ancient sculptures. One end of the theoretical continuum I am using here justifies being sceptical of claims about final, authoritative and authentic

meanings that would slam the door on the (lotus-like) unfolding of *dharmas*, knowledge and experience. At the other end, it is also appropriate to reject the anti-intellectual model of subjective consumer sovereignty popularly applied to the question of artistic meanings in modern capitalist cultures ('Well, to *me* it means X, Y or Z...'). This kind of subjectivism treats art and beauty as if they were trivial matters of individualistic consumer preference. This strategy is sometimes erroneously encouraged in the name of a misguided populism, as if our identity is so utterly lost in a narrowly modernist, economic model of selfhood that we are unable to make a significant connection with an art object unless we are rich enough to buy it at auction, or else claim private possession of its 'meaning' by adopting it as a mirror of our own subjective preoccupations.<sup>12</sup>

As a consumer of touristic experience I am free to possess the meanings I freely choose to attach – or not – to the sights I am seeing, however I cannot *literally* own these masterpieces from the museum and make them a part of my economizing practices of self-construction. I can, however, collect representations of them, or at least of some of them, from souvenir sellers, in the form of carvings, booklets and postcards. If I paid the necessary fees – through the front door or the back – to take photographs, then I can also 'have' the experience in that tangibly collectable form. And even barring all that, because of my world-view and the institutions of touristic travel, I can also collect these experiences in the more subtly objectified form of unique memories, and travellers' tales, conditioning my social identity as an educated, cosmopolitan who is well travelled, and possibly envied by those who can only dream of travelling to exotic places.

## **Sarnath and the Buddhist Circuit of Spiritual Tourism**

The four canonical destinations for ancient Buddhist pilgrimage are Bodhgaya (where Buddha was enlightened), Sarnath (site of his first discourse), Lumbini (place of birth) and Kushinagar (place of death). These canonical four have been augmented in modern times with the rebuilding of Sanchi in the nineteenth century (an ancient site particularly important to the early history of Ashoka and Sri Lankan Buddhism), Ajanta and Ellora. In the town of Sarnath alone one can find temples built by the devotees and governments of Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Tibet and Myanmar. A great deal more can be seen in Bodhgaya.

In an essay titled 'Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India', Upinder Singh (2010) has usefully documented some of the Indian government's efforts to promote an officially designated category of 'spiritual tourism' for a huge and growing class of foreign visitors that the author labels 'pilgrim tourists'. Singh argues that not only is most domestic tourism in India already intimately entangled with deep-rooted practices of pilgrimage (and I would add in my experience, social travel, especially for weddings, in which side trips to pilgrimage and archaeological sites are commonplace), this kind of 'spiritual tourism' is a relatively underdeveloped market that has almost limitless potential for growth in twenty-first century India. Government agencies are acutely aware of this, as evidenced in the advertising efforts launched in 2009, 'Come to India – Walk with the Buddha', which follows hot on the heels of a similar 'Footsteps of the Buddha' campaign, both of which are especially targeted to East and Southeast Asian countries where Buddhism is prevalent.<sup>13</sup>

### Some Final Remarks

The transitory nature of the manifest world has long been highlighted in the spiritual culture of ancient India. However, the exact nature and pace of change in the past two centuries of modernization has been deeply problematic. In his landmark study of mid-twentieth century Indian modernity, Milton Singer (1972) argues that, to a large extent, Indian culture has absorbed the modern forms much in the same way as it always did those in the past, by pragmatically 'compartmentalizing' them within their own proper spheres. Just as the mutually contradictory aims of *kama* (sense pleasures), *artha* (political-economic advantage) and *moksha* (spiritual liberation from the bondage of the senses, property, and false ego) are allotted to their respective stages of life, thereby allowing them to coexist without conflict, so too, nuclear physics, Christianity, capitalism, parliamentary democracy, Olympic sports, and other such modern contexts are able to coexist, side by side with other domains of practice, where the values of Hindu temple construction, Vedic sacrifices, yoga, or the performance of ancient musical modes (*ragas*) continue to flourish. Thus, phenomena rooted in antiquity are not simply made obsolete, but they continue to evolve, side by side in unforced dialogues, with newly emergent ones. In its compartmentalization practices, India can potentially offer the world a valuable lesson in keeping modern economics in its place, if it can manage to do so itself.



A. K. Ramanujan refers to Singer's notion of compartmentalization as the product of a broader kind of particularistic or 'context-sensitive' Indian way of thinking and acting (Ramanujan 1990). However, he also notes that South Asians find it increasingly difficult to contain modern forms within their appropriate spheres (Ramanujan 1990: 57). This is to be expected, given that modernity tends to be universalizing and adversarial in its operation. Today's relentlessly globalizing culture gives flesh to an ironically narrow-but-totalizing vision of reality. Because its practitioners tend to see this world-view as inevitable and natural, grounded in a parochial model of allegedly universal human 'nature' (economic man, or TOTREP, Trade-Off Talking Rational Economic Person), the model tends to be imperialistic. It challenges and works to replace all alternative (i.e., unnatural) cosmologies. As the quote cited by Bruno Latour at the outset of this essay reminds us, this is a competitive version of reality, composed of winners and losers: adversarial law, adversarial politics, adversarial businesses, adversarial sports, even adversarial personal relationships in which 'I' am right (by nature) and 'you' are inherently wrong, to the exact degree that you differ from me.

Obviously people have always had the *potential* to operate in competitive, selfish ways. What is new is that modern cultures of the market institutionalize a model of reality that legitimizes selfishness, as it naturalizes competition, making these—rather than relational values of humble restraint and cooperation—into an inevitable foundation for the universalizing values of money and its corresponding form of political power. Bringing this down to the realm of cultural tourism, the practices flowing from this cosmology strip vanquished traditions (e.g., ancient 'art') of their local values and meanings, replacing them with universalized ones, ultimately grounded in those of a victorious market culture. Deborah Root describes this process,<sup>14</sup> with reference to an imaginary traditional dance form:

To de-territorialize a traditional dance is to remove it from its social and ceremonial matrix, which initially can liberate the practice because it is no longer subject to a system of religious or social authority. People can dance whenever they want. Recoding occurs when a new system of meaning is attached to the newly free cultural form of practice and it becomes subject to that system of meaning. Today the main systems of meaning in culture tend to be organized around money, so we can say that the dance has been re-coded by capital. For instance, the folk dance can be taken out of a community—which is to say, detached from its local social and religious context—and performed in a capital city for tourists... [in this way] a living

cultural practice is subsumed under the abstract notion of folklore, and the performance of the dance is inserted into a new system of exchange dependent on cash payment. The original meaning is decoded, or de-territorialized (we can imagine the sense in which this means 'removed from its territory') and quickly re-coded as something else, according to a new system of meaning determined by outsiders with different values and agendas (Root 1996: 84-85).<sup>15</sup>

Thus recoded by capital, traditional art forms are transformed into commercial fetishes that are co-created alongside an economic form of selfhood. Macpherson (1962) nicely summarizes this economic mode of personhood by the term 'possessive individualism'. Touristic objectifications of the possessive individual commonly take the forms of photography, or a collection of material artefacts, souvenirs and art objects. Such art objects, along with their objectified meanings, are also granted the universal right of freedom – just like persons – when they are de-territorialized, and uprooted from the bondage of tradition. Thereby modernized (which is to say, in practice, marketed), traditional art objects are also like persons, except that the temporal medium of my human existence is sold on a labour market while theirs is sold at auction or in a retail market. These pragmatic values are routinely concealed behind a smokescreen of authoritative meanings that treat art objects through an authorship/authority/authenticity paradigm, which pretends that the object continues to mythically exist in its own past, specifically in the authentic, authorial moment of its initial production and use. Such presuppositions are derived from a broader, implicitly *ex nihilo*, economic creation myth that legitimizes possessive individualism: I own something in a mythically absolute sense because of my creativity. 'I' invented, discovered, authored, conquered it, or else I 'made' the money by which I purchased the creative property rights of someone else. We similarly obfuscate meanings by treating them in the same way: as if they too were private property, expressions of sovereign consumer preference (i.e., more-or-less arbitrary eye-of-the-beholder myths) rather than as emergent properties of public sign systems unfolding in time.

The beauty of the market is that it does not require any agreement about truth, only popularity, as measured by sales. It is an excellent system for the production and distribution of shoes and broccoli. The problem arises through ascribing the status of universal and absolute to what is historically contingent. This can result in such a deluded enthusiasm for the free market that true believers will work to promiscuously unleash the magic of the hidden hand by privatizing and, in effect monetizing, *every* domain of existence. The wisdom of the Buddha points

toward a middle way. Applied to globalization, a middle way would be one that strives to balance rights and duties, self-interest and public interest, private property and the commons, freedom and constraints, and so on. By contrast, the rise of a globalizing free market culture amounts to the freedom of market values to invade and colonize *every* context of life—art, medicine, law, education, research, childcare, etc.—and to rewrite their local values (beauty, well-being, fairness, wisdom, nurture, etc.) as homogenous market values, offered solely in exchange for money. In short, these efforts work to make the tail wag the dog, by turning the political-economic *means* of existence into its universal *ends*.

We all say we know better, but our lived practices betray us. In the domain of art for instance, the relevant values should be aesthetic. But if we can no longer agree on what a good painting is, then by default, the market steps in and a precise hierarchy of value is realized at auction. In the domain of research and education, truth (at least in its contingent forms) should be the dominant value. If those of the free market take over, then it is not truth, but demand, as expressed through nothing more substantial than popularity—rigorously measurable by sales outcomes and enrolments—that determines what is taught and what ideas will sell. The same corruption occurs when the values of medicine and law are co-opted by those of supply and demand. All the demand in the world is meaningless if not empowered by money. In such a system one gets only as much justice and health care one can has money to pay. Radically unlike *moksha*, a universalizing market definition of freedom makes one exactly as free as one's pockets are deep.

Again, let me stress that the problem is not with the free market and its values *per se*, it is their naturalization and universalization—today proceeding toward unconditional victory under the banner of inevitabilities, such as globalization—that generates the problems of market imperialism.

That said, it would be premature to say that the values and supreme symbol system (i.e., money) of a fundamentalist, free-market cosmology have yet been successful in colonizing the values of *every* domain of organic life and practice on the planet. It just seems to be headed in that direction.<sup>16</sup> As I have argued here, the narrowly economic values of cultural tourism in India are unfolding in a thankfully uneasy relationship to the values of scholarship, education and conservation, institutionally upheld to a substantial degree (at least in official lip service) by the ASI.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, both tourism and scholarship are forced to grant space to the religious and spiritual values that many segments of the global

community continue to pursue through their ongoing uses of India's traditional visual culture. If South Asian practices of compartmentalization can be successfully applied to the free market – constraining it within a properly limited arena such that other self-organizing domains of life can also flourish *with* it, rather than against it – India could serve as a beacon of reason for societies struggling with absolutist modes of free-market imperialism.

The traditional spiritual values of truth, wisdom and compassion that originally generated and formally organized the art objects unearthed at Sarnath are not really fossilized *things* of the past. They are just publicly represented *as if* they were. Unfortunately their stunted social life today requires their potentials to unfold against the grain, in a hostile, adversarial environment wherein modern market values work relentlessly to displace and erode them in the interests of an alternative, political-economic reality that, to its true believers, is simply a matter of being 'realistic'. But it is not true that reality simply *is* that way. Through the creation and elaboration of our collective institutions – especially those of the free market – we are busily *making* it that way. The claims we make today in our public discourses on television, the blogosphere, and assorted forms of electronic media are far more potent, aggressive and pervasive than the subtle aesthetic media of ancient India. But the latter do not really exist in the past. They exist today, as a potential resource, reminding us that we can and should be making efforts to wake up, spiritually and otherwise. We have inherited such resources from many of the world's ancient traditions, not just India. If we triumphant moderns can muster the humility to learn from these ostensibly defeated versions of reality, the potential benefits can be considerable.

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## NOTES

1. The field research on which this essay depends was conducted in 2007-2008 with financial assistance from the University of Washington, for which I express my gratitude.
2. *Dharma* is commonly glossed as religion, law or duty, however, substantively it refers to codes of conduct appropriate to diverse modes and stages of being.
3. 'I' own it because I was the first to invent it, discover it, author it, claim it or conquer it.
4. The earliest surviving accounts were written by the Chinese pilgrims Faxian (337-422) and Xuanzang (602-664). See Legge (1886) and Watters (1904).
5. I am well aware that some of my colleagues consider the word 'consultant' preferable to the word 'informant', however, I defer to conventional historical usage in the interest of clarity.
6. And this makes the remarks of scholars like me into representations of representations of representations. This predicament is especially ironic and frustrating for those of us who still value the pursuit of the truths that are being represented over the fetishizing of the representational forms themselves. On the other hand, I suppose it isn't really a big deal in this case, so long as one maintains sufficient mindfulness to be aware of the game.
7. This is an almost negligible instance of a politically volatile phenomenon in contemporary India. Muslim rulers, like Buddhist and Hindu kings before them, commonly appropriated ancient sacred sites for the construction of mosques and other monuments. The most explosive example of this phenomenon in recent decades centres on a mosque allegedly constructed on the site of a temple that once commemorated the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram in Ayodhya (Bagla 2003).
8. I use the old, sexist term 'economic man' here for the sake of brevity, fully aware that many economists have updated their concept of 'human nature' through the use of more complex designations, such as TOTREP: Trade-Off Talking Rational Economic Persons (Sahlins *et al.* 1990). Such refinements, while welcome, do not address the fundamental ethnological problem in which authoritative members of a powerful economic culture use the authority of 'science' to naturalize and universalize what is, in fact, a highly parochial, *cultural* model of human 'nature'.
9. Although one might argue that they participate in a lived practice in acts of reading.
10. Between the end of the Harrappan culture in the early second millennium B.C.E. and the rise of the Mauryas in the third century B.C.E. there are virtually no stone carvings found in the South Asian archaeological record. It is reasonable to suggest that the Persian Empire and its practices of monumental stone carving and inscriptions provided a model for the sudden appearance of similar phenomena in India in the third century B.C.E.
11. For an extended discussion of museum-going as a ritualized practice, see Duncan 1995.
12. James Clifford comes close to endorsing this use by advocating the use of art objects as personal fetishes, with 'the power to fixate rather than simply the capacity to edify or inform... [allowing them to] once again be *objets sauvages*, sources of fascination with their power to disconcert' (1988: 229). This sounds intriguing, but it would entail sacrificing the kind of dialogical, cross-cultural emergence of significance advocated here.
13. In a similar vein, Kavita Singh (2010) analyzes the mixture of spiritual values, religious pilgrimage, politics, high-quality traditional craftsmanship, and robust,

- market-driven shopping and entertainment provisions seamlessly woven together in the construction of the hugely popular Akshardham temple complex in New Delhi. She argues that it serves as an exemplary model of growing trends in the quickly expanding domain of Hindu temple construction in the twenty-first century.
14. Root uses Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of de-territorializing and recoding. Picard (1996) offers a similar analysis of traditional Balinese dance performed in touristic contexts.
  15. The author's casual use of 'original meaning' follows from the political bent of her analysis, in which she sees the problem in terms of a dominant colonial and neocolonial culture that appropriates the physical and intellectual property of a subordinated native culture. When seen in terms of a modern economic world-view this is certainly true. However, at the same time, it risks obscuring the alternative conceptions of creativity and personhood that anthropologists seek to sympathetically recognize and understand.
  16. Here I draw on the insights of an important, much under-recognized work by the psychologist Barry Schwartz (1990) whose work has deeply influenced the perspective applied here. In this book, Schwartz brilliantly analyzes the problems of what he calls 'market imperialism', stemming from the lack of a rational American conversation about what values should be provided by the free market and what should be protected from it.
  17. Mary Hancock (2008) offers a useful analysis of the pressures that South Indian temples, museums and monuments have recently faced as they adapt to emerging political demands and neoliberal capitalist imperatives.

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