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## ‘Know Thyself and Change the World’: The Western Pilgrimage Narrative and South Asia

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This paper summarises recurring elements of contemporary pilgrimage narratives related to South Asia and their role in neo-colonial ‘globalisation.’ While sacred sites are visited by both local and international pilgrims, their recreation as story cannot be regarded as innocent, interwoven as it is in historical domination and appropriation. The paper focuses on two contemporary narratives that draw on the motif of odyssey. It explores, in part, the increasing role of social media and technology in the most recent incarnations of the paradigm.

**Key Words:** pilgrimage narrative, South Asia, odyssey, globalisation, Ramayana

This work is part of an ongoing study of how pilgrimage experience is translated as published story and text; in particular, it explores the ubiquity of pilgrimage narratives by Western writers in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States that focus on the Indian subcontinent. The marketing of this geographical space as a space of self-discovery and spiritual awareness has been featured since the Middle Ages, and appears now to be gathering female readers, especially people who are facing a personal life crisis, and (mostly recently) the so-called titans of technological development. In this particular study, I focus on both the positive and disturbing elements of authors who build pilgrimage accounts around the concept of ‘odyssey’ and use the Indian epic *Ramayana* as a framework. The article thus contributes to discussions of neocolonialism and cultural appropriation that appears, in many cases, to repeat the Orientalist assumptions of Europe since at least 1600. While noting recurring patterns is one of its contributions, the paper also raises questions about pilgrimage itself, and the fine line between exploration and exploitation in an increasingly narcissistic Western culture.

Beginning with the puzzling connection of technology magnates and pilgrimages to India, Annie Gowen’s article, *Inside the Temple that Attracts America’s Tech Titans* (2015), focuses on the mysterious popularity of the Kainchi Ashram in India. Apple’s Steve Jobs arrived at the ashram in 1974, after one of his fellow students urged him to meet its guru. But when he arrived, Jobs was disappointed to learn that the guru had died the previous September. In reflecting on this journey, Google’s Larry Brilliant comments that

*‘He was searching for the same thing all of us search for, what we’re still searching for, the meaning of life, why we live, how we can do anything good in our lifetimes [emphasis mine] ... [He was also searching for raw food] Where the hell am I going to get a good salad?’*

Gowen (2015) observes:

*The mystery is why this modest ashram would attract such a steady stream of American tech visionaries. Along with Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, Google’s Larry Page and Jeffrey Skoll, co-founder of eBay, have also made the pilgrimage. ‘Everybody in the world wants to go and see this place,’ said Brilliant: ‘It’s a combination of Eat Pray Love, know thyself and change the world.’*

That allusion to Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestseller and its cinematic translation reminds me again how narrating pilgrimage to South Asia for Western audiences is a trope that often requires no explanation. Almost two decades ago, and intriguingly after the tragic events of September 2001, these narratives came under scrutiny. That October, three Canadian writers were brought together in Vancouver to discuss the topic ‘Pilgrimages to India’ — Anita Rau Badami, Sylvia Fraser and Pramila Jayapal.<sup>[1]</sup> Badami has not written a pilgrimage narrative, but commented that she was unable to see the country of her birth as an outsider, and added that as an Indian she was busy trying to live ‘without drowning or dying while catching a bus’ (Moosa, 2001:10). She, along with members of the audience, balked at Fraser’s seemingly-easy equation of India as a site of ‘unique spiritual connectedness’ and especially took issue with Fraser’s suggestion that community can be enhanced by catastrophic events (Moosa, 2001:10).

These Canadian pilgrimage narratives were my initial focus, linked subsequently with Australian Sarah MacDonald's *Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure*, and American Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*. In this paper, I will sketch the recurring pattern of pilgrimage narratives related to South Asian travel; I then examine two texts — Martin Buckley's *An Indian Odyssey* and Aaron Smith's *Shanti Bloody Shanti: An Indian Odyssey* — that link the paradigm with Homer's epic. Intriguingly, these texts reframe Homer's epic as pilgrimage narrative; they focus on the enduring power of story, and their own stories subsequently become popular and therefore influential.<sup>[2]</sup>

Western preoccupation with South Asia as a site of pilgrimage — its rehearsal of Edward Said's idea of the 'Oriental' (1978:158) — is itself fascinating.<sup>[3]</sup> While the Indian notion of 'tirtha-yatra' (literally a journey to a river-crossing, or metaphorically binding

oneself to a threshold) does intersect with the notion of 'pilgrimage' (from the Latin 'peregrine' or foreigner), Western writers inscribe South-Asian sites as spaces of self-absorption and rarely of interaction. The Indian notion of 'tirtha-yatra' assisted in the forging of a national identity; however, that project was aided by British colonisation. The resulting availability of the British infrastructure of roads and railways helped to increase the frequency of visits to tirthas, and the concept of a 'grand tour' of India, which reinforces the association of pilgrimage and colonisation.<sup>[4]</sup> This identity integrates 'thousands and possibly tens of thousands of *tirthas* throughout India, Nepal, and Tibet' (Gladstone, 2005:176); moreover, '*tirthas* have been catering to travellers for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and receive far more visitors annually than Disney World, Las Vegas, and Cancun combined' (193). Furthermore, as David Gladstone's *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour* (2005) has explored, both local and international pilgrims travel to the same sites; however, at these sites they stay in diverse establishments — hotels and guesthouses instead of *dharmashalas* — and foreigners

*patronize the 'all-you-can-eat' buffets and restaurants serving Western-style food, ... [while] Indians eat at 'dhabas' [literally swamps or low-ground greasy spoons] (187).*

Gladstone argues that tirtha yatra may mean:

*a devoted wife, one's parents, a sacred shrine, or a spiritual teacher ... yatra need not entail a physical journey on the earth's surface but may refer to a journey undertaken within one's soul (2005:174).*

Additionally, the 'meaning' of pilgrimage differs according to culture, place, and language; the Sanskrit term 'tirtha-yatra' is almost always translated as 'pilgrimage,' but has distinctive resonances. Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj (2003) in *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* acknowledges that the travels of pilgrims to sacred sites

1. See the description of the session 'Pilgrimages to India'— which brought together writers Anita Rau Badami, Sylvia Fraser, and Pramila Jayapal, with Moderator Sabita Majid in Vancouver, October 20, 2001 (Moosa 2001). For Badami, religion is 'almost in the realm of fiction,' as she was raised in a Hindu household, but received a Catholic education' (Moosa 2001:10). Moreover, Jayapal's book, titled *Pilgrimage to India*, is an intriguing revision of the pilgrim account, since it addresses the practical issues of women and children. Having made her 'pilgrimage,' she was aware that 'unlike the women around her, she knew she was privileged because she had the option of leaving and returning to her comfortable home in the States' (Moosa 2001:10). Both the NRI writers and members of the audience stressed that

*characterizations of India as possessing a unique spiritual connectedness are certainly questionable, in light of caste and religious divisions. Moderator Majid asked the authors' views on the North American sense of community, to which Fraser quickly answered that catastrophic events seem necessary for this to emerge. Her statement was emotionally charged, and took the audience ... aback. To prevent the discussion from taking a dangerous turn, the moderator soon posed a different question. The discussion was shifted away from opinions on recent world events, and back to perceptions of India (Moosa 2001: 10).*

2. Jonah Blank's *Arrow of the Blue Skinned God* (2006) is yet another example of scholarly accounts of journeys through South Asia using the Ramayana as model, and educates its readers on the socio-political context, the narrator's experiences, and the ancient epic itself. Both Blank and Buckley use the format of alternating between reflection, observation, and narration of the Ramayana as told by Valmiki, Tulsidas, and others.

3. Steve Clark (1999:11) describes the term 'pilgrimage' as 'over-determined' and argues that this term 'conflates empirical reference to the biblical domain; a residual context of medieval journeying; and an internalisation of this as spiritual quest.'

4. The Sanskrit term 'tirtha-yatra' can be defined as 'undertaking journey to river fords'—where the 'river ford' is a threshold separating and connecting material and immaterial worlds. This notion has been associated with external places—such as rivers, running waters, hot springs, hills, and forests—and with an inward state acquired through meditation. Bhardwaj notes,

*The number of Hindu [my emphasis] sanctuaries in India is so large and the practice of pilgrimage so ubiquitous that the whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organized into a system of pilgrimage centres and their fields (2003:7).*

*have given meaning to India as a cultural entity [and he also states that] The concept of pilgrimage exists in all major religions, although ... its meaning varies widely within the canonical structure of each religion (p.1).*

The non-Indian pilgrim translates the visits to sacred sites as ‘work-related’ and potentially lucrative, rather than spiritually meritorious. As Gillian Whitlock (2007:15) recently contends, such narratives can become a

*commodity that is marketed ... to authenticate and legitimate the narrative and secure its reception by the powerful reading communities that range from the metropolitan intelligentsia and the suburban book clubs, to the fans of the best seller.<sup>[5]</sup>*

Thus, the danger is reinforcement of ‘comforting narcissistic recognition that denies difference across cultures’ — a reassurance that ‘she/he is just like us’ (Whitlock, 2007:15).

In pilgrimage accounts, the narrator alternates between witness and participant — participating in courses, but often adopting an ethnographic approach.<sup>[6]</sup> While narration pays attention to the past, and bears similarities to the *memento mori*, participation demands dedicated attention to the present. Here, then, is the pilgrimage paradigm I’ve identified in popular narratives involving travel to South Asia:

1) First, travel is often inspired by a personal crisis — breakdown of a marriage, death, illness — and therefore a focus on personal need or intellectual curiosity. Western pilgrimage narratives emphasize personal transformation and quest for self-knowledge; in some cases, they draw on Indian asceticism, the sanyasi who leaves human community. Aaron Smith makes his journey after

his divorce and psychological breakdown, along with substance abuse; Martin Buckley (2008:7) admits that on his first trip to India, in 1982: ‘I looked for my reflection in the river, but it was too dark.’ Twenty-five years later, he returns with a scholarly aim to retrace the rough journey outlined in the Ramayana (Buckley, 2008:10) — a ‘cultural’ and ‘literary adventure’ (270).

2) Western narratives highlight the Sanskrit idea of ‘tirtha-yatra,’ emphasising crossing of or immersion in rivers, lakes, the ocean; they also, however, presume the ‘peregrine’ or ‘foreigner’ element, writing self-consciously from the perspective of outsider. The target audience is typically also an outsider, and the narrative serves multiple purposes, incorporating maps, descriptions of places, italicized Sanskrit words, and explanations. The map at the beginning of Buckley’s book is ‘based on Survey of India’ - a map produced by the government, but gives an impression of cultural artefact. The introduction includes a pronunciation guide, along with an outline of the Ramayana’s main characters and plot. Western pilgrimage narratives contain multiple interviews, typically with experts at local sites, but sometimes with fellow travellers and co-workers. In fact, one of Buckley’s most powerful inclusions is a verbatim interview with a representative of a Hindu fundamentalist group lobbying for rebuilding the temple in Ayodhya.

3) That said, Western narratives typically distinguish themselves from popular guidebooks and particularly the iconic *Lonely Planet*. Buckley (2008:84), for instance, describes that guide as a ‘fat, superficial volume, indispensable then to the English-speaking traveller’; ‘I was meeting many Lonely Planetters who sneered their way across India’ but at the same time he admits to falling in love with India. Indians, he notes,

*weren’t sprung with tension like us, there was a kind of languor, and their limbs looked weighted when they came to rest. They were at ease with themselves, an ease born perhaps of complacency ... I sensed something of the erotic tension that had bound the British and the Indians for well over a century (Buckley, 2008:86).*

Buckley acknowledges that the purpose of the book is to acquaint Western readers with the Ramayana and its cultural importance. However, he also notes that

5. Graham Huggan (2001) suggests the connection between popular subaltern life narratives and consumer products.

6. The notion of witnessing is equated, for scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, again with imperialism, in which ‘seeing is not merely seeing; it is ... ‘witnessing’—an act implying a special social function and gravity’ (Clark 1999: 32). Greenblatt summarizes that ‘everything in the European dream of possession rests on witnessing understood as a form of significant and representative seeing’ (Clark 1999: 35). Moreover, the ‘time lag’ between the act of seeing and the recording of the journey undermines self-presentation as ‘pilgrimage guide.’ The witness is also a participant in various courses, programs, and acts of worship. That contradiction emerges, for instance, in the incorporation of maps, glossaries, bibliographies, and interview-style conversations into all the texts I have studied.



*it will be published in India' and pleads with Indian readers 'to be indulgent towards my inevitable simplifications and misunderstandings ... Devout Hindus should take note before reading any further that they may find aspects of this book disagreeable* (Buckley, 2008:2).

- 4) The stories presume that India — South Asia in general — is both essentially and universally spiritual; an element can be experienced by a visitor who is open to it. As Said has argued, the 'Orient' is 'for the European observer [always] a place of pilgrimage' (1978:158). In Buckley's book, a chapter titled 'Spiritual Tourist' stresses:

*[T]he India I wanted to meet was spiritual. Ideally, it would conclude with meeting God in the Himalayas ... I was one of those vague seekers who'd been pitching up in India since the sixties, demanding enlightenment. I was about to learn that India, in many ways, is spirit. It doesn't live at a particular address, it needn't be exactly sought. Open yourself up, and it finds you ... I was a member of one of the world's most emotionally unopen peoples* (Buckley, 2008:76).<sup>[7]</sup>

- 5) The narratives incorporate personal experiences of illness, tragedy, and death on the journey itself, and these traumas provoke an emotional and spiritual connection. For Buckley, his fellow journalist and friend, Ravi, is killed in a tragic auto-rickshaw accident; Smith not only becomes gravely ill in Varanasi, but also loses one of his European traveling companions in a freak accident.

- 6) Most pilgrimage narratives incorporate a return, in which the pilgrim adopts some dramatic change as a result of the journey. In many ways, then, they repeat the circular pattern associated with romance and epic. The primary distinction is that epic is typically construed as nation-building rather than as life writing.

For example, David Iglehart's short story, 'An Indian Odyssey,' is a simplistic fictional example of the pilgrimage model overlapping with both Homer's *Odyssey* and Indian epic. In this story,

7. Buckley writes:

*Indian sacred spaces do not have to be consecrated by some remote archbishop in order to become 'legit'. They are sacred as a result of being regarded as sacred. As such, they give the devotee permission, as it were, to venerate. This is how Hinduism is. The state of veneration, the ability to experience a religious emotion, is never far away.* (Buckley 2008: 163-164).

Doug Thompson, on a train to Bangalore for work in computer consulting, mysteriously meets with an old man reading the Bhagavad Gita on the floor of his compartment. Coincidentally, Doug has picked up a copy in his hotel in Bombay, translated into English and described as the 'Indian equivalent of a Gideon's Bible.'

The old man speaks to him in cryptic phrases such as 'I may not be here for long' and is described as appearing penniless, polite, and unassuming. He is almost a caricature in his 'hand-woven cloth' outfit and his thick glasses. He says he 'rejoice[s]' that Doug is reading the Gita, and refers to Doug as 'foreigner' while he notes that he is 'always' on pilgrimage. Doug responds to the old man's description of his journey to the southern tip of India as an 'odyssey' and his companion immediately retells the story of Odysseus as 'the great pilgrim.' The old man says he has been to many 'holy places' on direct instruction from Krishna, the divine figure who reveals himself in the Gita. As Doug becomes increasingly overwhelmed and physically ill, the old man gives him an unidentified little white pill. He then mysteriously disappears, but not before writing in Doug's copy of the Gita 'If you don't take your medicine, you won't get well.'

If this 'Indian Odyssey' seems remarkably formulaic, Buckley's identically-titled 2008 book more carefully interweaves his retelling of the Ramayana with his travels through India and Sri Lanka. However, the scholarly approach is

8. Valmiki dictated the story in 500-100 BCE, and divided it into 7 books. It is written in Sanskrit. The earliest written text was found in Nepal in the 11th century. *Ramayana* literally means the deeds of Rama; *Ramcharitmanas* is translated as the 'lake of the deeds of Rama' and written in Hindi in the 16th century. There are significant differences in how Rama is depicted: primarily, he is human in Valmiki vs. incarnation of Vishnu in Tulsidas; he has many wives in Valmiki, but is loyal to Sita in Tulsidas; the depiction of Sita as a strong, independent woman is also altered; and Hanuman becomes a god figure vs. a tribal human. Most recently, the story is used to unite India into one tapestry - see sites like [tripoto.com](http://tripoto.com) and [www.mahanbharat.net](http://www.mahanbharat.net) (make India great again) but this is not an innocent story or aim, because it has had impact on minority religions, and many that are appropriated into India as a whole. Such readings debate the long-standing presumptions of an Aryan invasion, and whether this is historically accurate, or whether Indians are one people. In the first version, Ravana becomes the hero for Dravidian people, who see this as a paradigm for the invasion by Aryans; Hindus have played down that version, in order to claim that Muslims were the first invaders of India.

counterpoised with a personal quest. Buckley (2008:161) notes repeatedly the distinctions between Valmiki's version and Tulsidas' and their implications for Indian nationalism:<sup>[8]</sup> he describes his own version as a 'cocktail' of various accounts.

Buckley's *Indian Odyssey* (2008) is unique in its blend of genres — similar to Jonah Blank's *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God* (2006) — in linking pilgrimage and epic, and addressing the material effects of story and the enduring impact of the Ramayana. Debates about historical invasions, sharing of sites by multiple faiths, and violence are, he notes, often related to the story of Rama and Sita, while even a straightforward geographical identification of the journey is fraught. Tulsidas' version emphasises knowledge of the story, and devotion to Rama and Sita rather than travel to specific sites, although it is Tulsidas who privileges the divine connection. His version is a translation of the Sanskrit into the vernacular — an endeavour not without controversy. He writes that

*All forms of discipline ... have but one aim: devotion to Rama ... Be assured that outcasts and sinners, that non-Hindus and foreigners — all are purified if they but once repeat His name. Rama* (351).

That statement suggests that all who venerate Rama can receive merit. Buckley stresses that this story is far more familiar to South Asians than Homer's *Odyssey* is to Western readers. He also contrasts the religious devotion of South Asians with the rationalism and dogmatism of Christianity. He writes that

*The spiritual impulse is not to be confused with tribal enmities, with the cruel doctrines of Islam that saw Hindus murdered in their hundreds of thousands, or the Christian doctrines that in mediaeval times saw mystics condemned as heretics, and tortured and broken on the wheel. Why has the Western tradition of spirituality committed suicide?* (Buckley, 2008:353).

#### 9. Unique intrinsic spirituality of India:

*As I travelled, I wondered how much of India was woven into the myths of Hinduism. It seemed that every hill and Lake [cap?] had some spiritual significance, was mentioned in some holy text or other and subsequently patinated with temples and officiating Brahmins and festivals and pilgrims, and an ultimate commercial layer of souvenirs and veneratory paraphernalia. Hinduism was India, a self-contained system that explained itself to itself, physically and metaphysically. You almost had to be brought up in the faith if you wanted to decode its profusion of Gods and symbols, legends and obligations* (Buckley 2008:84)

Buckley (2008:270) expresses his hope that making the Ramayana accessible to Westerners will be a key to 'understanding India' and Rama as inspiring 'spiritual devotion almost unimaginable in the West' (270).<sup>[9]</sup> He says of the Indian tourist industry and government's appropriations of the epic:

*To the sceptical mind, it suggested spiritual tourism — that opportunistic **Brahmans** had seen the grip the story exercised on people's imaginations, and attempted to cash in. But I wasn't on a quest to prove, or disprove, the truth of any tradition. It was the **enduring power of the story** that interested me [emphasis added]. The cult of Rama had reached its climax in southern India, with a great wave of devotion and temple construction, about a thousand years ago. At that time, it was almost certainly easy to travel to [Sri] Lanka on foot, or by the easiest of ferry rides. Countless numbers of pilgrims must have done so since then, for the traditions to have remained so strong.* (Buckley, 2008:270)

In his own personal journey, however, he experiences a spiritual transformation in Almora, after the death of Ravi:

*I stood to one side, shaking, and the tears poured out of me ... it was the death of Ravi that lay on me most heavily. I had no sense of direction or motivation ... I didn't know what I was doing there, or where I was going next, and I didn't care* (Buckley, 2008:120/122).

After collapsing on the ground, he reflects:

*It entered me, it was me. My heart exploded. I fell flat on my face and began to writhe on the ground, delirious, muttering prayers, at the same time wanting to make love to the warm, dry earth. Then I fell unconscious ... For several days I was filled with a sense of the oneness, the interconnectedness of everything. I was well disposed to everyone I met; indeed to existence itself — I was in love* (Buckley, 2008:123).

Perhaps inevitably, Buckley takes a broad and universalist approach to Hinduism, and appropriates this story — its 'erotic tension' — on his journey home. Ironically, he does not appear to recognise the power of his own narrative, since subsequent guides to the Ramayana in English refer directly to Buckley's retelling. He suggests that Westerners think of India as exotic and irrational, but then personally feels the wonder inspired by one of the gurus he interviews, who focuses on the eternal union of Rama and Sita. Buckley states:

*This book began life as a cultural journey, a literary adventure. By the end of the journey I thought I understood what it had meant to a hundred generations of devout Hindus to sit at the feet of the God Rama ... I no longer see a book, or a dusty Ayodhyan hilltop, or headlines about religious clashes, or fragments of a journey from Ayodhya to Sri Lanka. I don't really see anything. I seem to hear — indeed, to sense — an ancient alchemy:*

*Sita Rama, Sita-Ram, Sitaram, Sitaram,  
Sitaram, Sitaram, Sitaram — Jai Sitaram*

(Buckley, 2008:355)

In contrast to this earnest ending — witnessing in an evangelical Christian sense — the very title of Aaron Smith's book, *Shanti Bloody Shanti: An Indian Odyssey* (2013), immediately suggests an irreverent tone; Smith is an Australian journalist, trained in Environmental Science. His narrative odyssey begins on the festival of Holi in 2006; a rough group of traveling companions, vertigo evoked by encounters, hallucinogenic drugs, and close calls with disaster recur through the story. In fact, one major distinction between Buckley and Smith is that Smith honestly depicts his 'peregrine / outsider' position, and the experts he interviews are as peculiar as him. He states:

*We were soldiers of misfortune in search of truth, armed only with our Lonely Planet guidebooks and backpacks — jet-set vagabonds with nothing to our names but travel-insurance self-assurance* (Smith, 2013:15).

However, the book ends with a measure of humility:

*Even though the tapestry of this country's endless history, the very fabric of this society, is worn threadbare, India has a durability, resilience, and endurance like no other. In the 'new is best' obsessed West, India would be thrown in the trash, or worse, recycled, rehashed, and repackaged ... I had come to India for some sort of enlightenment, to enrich my soul, to ascend to a higher plane of consciousness ... Ganga made me face death, mortality, and our place in the wheel of life. Almost dying in Varanasi ... made me realize I had to leave an old way of life I could no longer sustain* (Smith, 2013:239-241).

One particularly self-aware point recounts his conversation with an Indian family on the train, going to the furthest sacred site they can afford, which is Haridwar; Smith himself is headed all the way to Gaumukh. He notes:

*I am certainly very privileged to be able to make a journey many consider to be sacred, I'm*

*determined not to belittle the experience* (Smith, 2013:142).

The raw moment of tirtha-yatra occurs when Smith travels first to Gaumukh, and with a number of ominous signs, to Gangotri, the source of the Ganges and the holy site of Shiva. Here, the erotic connection is that of Shiva and Ganga. He describes the river:

*Rumbling like thunder, the river is ungodly and deafening...The awesome destructive power of Shiva and his tempestuous wife Ganga is all apparent now* (Smith, 2013:214).

After a tragic accident, the group is in communal shock, aware that the mad adventure they have been engaged in is actually tangible; he reflects, 'It's real; part of me fantasized that we could revive her and everything would be OK' (Smith, 2013:219). Afterwards, however, Smith (2013:229) distances himself from the real and immediate by interpreting it through Hindu stories:

*Myth states that the Ganges is the melted body of Vishnu and that Vishnu sleeps on a serpent — a serpent that's the cosmic ocean and Shiva's symbol of death.*

He recalls that Dahlia had a fear of snakes, and had seen one on the path; repeatedly, he suggests that the river — even Shiva himself — claimed her. Shifts from past to present tense — e.g. 'it's real' vs. 'part of me fantasized' — in many passages underscore the time-lag between experience and record. Thus, while Buckley moves from appreciation of Ramayana as story to a direct, personal devotion, Smith ends far from the smug and flippant beginning.

Unlike Gilbert's story, which begins with breakdown and a vision of the divine on her own bathroom floor, these narratives are refreshing because they begin in self-assured distancing, and end in self-effacing recognition. In fact, Nyla Matuk's scathing review (2008) of Elizabeth Gilbert's bestseller presents it as emblematic of the 'culture of narcissism.' She writes:

*Gilbert's ashram experience tries to show how difficult it is to shed Western self-preoccupation in such an ascetic environment ... in writing the book, she makes herself an exception and brings into relief the very tendency she hopes to neuter. Any self-erasure or humility she may have gained is cancelled.*

Thus, it simply reinforces the cataloguing of individual lives as:

*a set of consumer choices ... Travel, consume (eat), meditate (pray), and watch me (love me)*



*doing it. Read my book about it! Watch me on TV! Please look at me!*

In some of the most recent pilgrimage narratives, however, there is no book — blogs, biographies, video chats, and business guides have taken on some of the purposes of the carefully-woven text. When Facebook's Zuckerberg met with Indian Prime Minister Modi, he recounted his own pilgrimage to India:

*Early on in our history ... we hit a tough patch and a lot of people wanted to buy Facebook, and thought we should sell the company. I went and I saw Steve Jobs, and he told me that in order to reconnect with what I thought was the mission of the company, I should visit this temple that he had gone to in India early on in his evolution of thinking about what he wanted Apple and his vision of the future to be (Heisler, 2015).*

Zuckerberg summarised that

*our mission is to give everyone in the world the power to share what's important ... and to connect every person in the world (Reisinger, 2015).*

However, he downplayed the fact that 'more than 130 million people in India use Facebook' (Reisinger, 2015), which makes South Asia the second-largest market for social media. After Zuckerberg's visit, attendance at the ashram tripled,<sup>[10]</sup> and both Western and South Asian people businessmen began arriving,

10. Devotees say much of Kainchi's appeal is connected to its spiritual founder, Neem Karoli Baba (Gowen 2016). The sadhu, or holy man, came to the hills from a nearby state and lived in a cave for a time — a spot preserved at the ashram and lighted by candles — before the first temple was built in 1964. A small person wrapped in a large plaid shawl, Neem Karoli Baba normally sat on an elevated cot as followers meditated around him, offering a few kind words, a laugh and occasionally throwing fruit. His philosophy was simple — 'all one.' He exuded goodness, according to devotee Craig Mather, 64, a business analyst from Wales. When he first saw the holy man in 1973, he said, 'It was like seeing the sun — dressed in a blanket.' The idea of expanding consciousness is inextricably linked with the hippie counterculture movement of the 1960s and early 1970s and those like Jobs who developed personal computers (Gowen 2016).

11. One such pilgrim was Sheelendra Pratap Singh, 28, a New Delhi resident who said he made the trip because of Zuckerberg's journey. Singh was searching for inspiration, too. Business at his civil construction firm is down 50 percent. 'I thought if I came here, Kainchi Dham would bless me, and business will improve,' he said (Gowen 2016).

hoping to get a look at what is now being called the 'Zuckerberg temple.'<sup>[11]</sup> The irony of that label as a sign of re-appropriation and globalisation does not leave much room for innovation in the high-tech pilgrimage narrative. In fact, the commercial stakes are clearly higher (Lane, 2012).

Perhaps it is only in moments of what Ruth Behar (1996:7) terms 'vulnerable observation' that Western narratives may diverge from the colonialist narrative of possession.<sup>[12]</sup> The recognition of the material reality of pilgrimage sites and their peoples, provides another element of hope (Lane, 2012). For instance, Buckley's narrative emphasizes that 'since 1992, 13,000 people have died because of the *Ramayana*' (2008:12); the material framework of sacred sites, and the authority of story can have devastating human costs.

In general, both Buckley (2008) and Smith (2013) diverge from the stale environment of narcissistic pilgrimage narratives and their high-tech counterparts. It is ironic that Silicon Valley itself has become a pilgrimage site with its own power; also, technology has made the physical — and even metaphysical — connection with sacred space in South Asia a blossoming industry in its own right. '*Pujas to pilgrimages — these startups are disrupting spirituality*' (Ayyar, 2017) describes how technology is helping young, busy middle-class Indians and foreigners connect to South Asian sites. Since youths lack the commitment to engage in physical journeys, a company has created virtual pilgrimages through Skype. One can complete the Char-dam-yatra, or four-point pilgrimage, electronically, and receive a certificate of authenticity signed by a temple priest. Perhaps more ironic, Ethan Baron (2016) focuses on how Silicon Valley itself has become a site for pilgrimages, especially from Asia; these are called 'technology tourists and pilgrims.' Facebook and Google are top choices, and Stanford's professor of communications, Fred Turner refers to it as

*people on a pilgrimage ... Folks are looking for a physical place behind the kind of dematerialised experience that they have online (Baron, 2016).*

Rather than self-seeking, it is termed 'selfie-seeking.' Golden Horizon Tours charges thousands of dollars for group tours past these sites.

So is it connection, community, or isolation we are nurturing through pilgrimage, and through individuals who adopt the storyteller's power (Whitlock, 2007:13)? In another rare moment of 'vulnerable



observation' as distinct from imperialist gaze, Buckley (2008:83) describes his visit to Varanasi:

*It was strange to be a tourist floating on the stuff, the deity, in which these pilgrims were immersing themselves. They never looked up at you, were wholly unaware of themselves as spectacle. And you respected the fact that this was an intimate act on their part.*

I have suggested that the very act of recording, photographing, of writing often contradicts the ideal of connecting with others, not to mention experiencing the divine; if pilgrimage is truly about yoking ourselves to tangible sacred space, the most recent developments of the paradigm — the pilgrim's story — certainly does not connect the whole world, as Zuckerberg

envisions, but potentially distances us from each other and from sacred space. Arguably, while Buckley's use of present tense appears at the end of the book, it is Smith's self-conscious shifts between past and present that provides a useful ground for resistance to the formulaic paradigm, and potentially unsettles the reader — allows 'us to think beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own' (Whitlock, 2007:15). This nexus of positive and disturbing elements in a recurring story, then, are an important contribution to the study not only of pilgrimage, but of how pilgrimage is translated as story, and subsequently sold to a 'foreign' (Western) audience.

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12. Clark (1999: 18) notes that Western pilgrimage accounts can be read as memento mori: the 'traveler is always leaving; both voyaging and narration presuppose continuous deferral ... Even the modern tourist itinerary with its echoes of medieval pilgrimage in sacred sites, liminal zones, holy relics, possesses something of the same memento mori quality.' In *The Rope in the Water* (2001: 281), this element emerges resoundingly during Fraser's trip to Varanasi, 'India's holiest city.' It is here that she focuses explicitly on death and the Sanskrit 'tirtha,' which she translates as 'a crossing place where heaven and earth meet, like the finger of God stretching across the abyss to man, nearly touching' (Fraser 2001: 292). Though her visit to Varanasi seems preoccupied with cremation—the so-called 'burning ghats'—it concludes with a notably 'Western' reflection: 'I am the keeper of the memories. Nothing of my intimate past exists except as I remember it, and when I die, all that will dissolve for want of witnesses' (emphasis added, Fraser 2001: 309). Fraser's contentious 'rescue' during her 'rope in the water' experience also emphasizes the memento mori. She struggles with the meaning of the rope throughout the second part of the book, concluding that 'I—the conscious I writing this book—don't know what happened at Kovalam' (322); she alternates between rope as hallucination, rope as miracle, and an ordinary rope that she was 'lucky to have found when [she] stuck [her] hand down in the ocean' (322). Intriguingly, she prefers not to view it as a link with the Indians who rescue her! MacDonald's moment in the water—'undertaking journey to river fords'—takes place at the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. Despite an apparently cynical attitude throughout most of the festival, she impulsively kneels in the river and splashes water on her forehead at the end of the chapter; she states, 'I sense strength and grace; I swoon with a dose of the divine and a feeling that I'm part of a universal force' (Fraser 2001: 147). Her moment of presumed enlightenment is contextualized by the living crowds of Indians who join her in the water.

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