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RESEARCH NOTE



'Reverse gaze' in spiritual tourism: fact or myth?

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ABSTRACT

The term 'reverse gaze' is used in tourism academia to describe the interaction between tourist photographers and local subjects, which challenges traditional power dynamics in tourism. However, further research is needed to explore this concept within the wider context of tourism. In this research note, I adopt an autoethnographic approach to provide a reflective analysis of the *Ganga Aarti* ritual in India. Specifically, I examine the nuances of the reverse gaze concept in the realm of spiritual tourism, contributing to a deeper understanding of its dynamics. Through exploring the interplay between tourists and locals during the *Ganga Aarti* ritual, this study sheds light on the transformative power of the reverse gaze and its implications for cultural immersion and spiritual experiences. The empirical findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge in tourism studies and provide opportunities for further exploration in this area.

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Introduction

Tourism research analyses the interaction between tourists and hosts from various perspectives. Urry (1990) coined the term 'tourist gaze' to describe how tourists perceive and experience a destination through their cultural lens. This concept lays the groundwork for studying the relationship between tourists and hosts. Maoz (2006) expands upon Urry's work by introducing the concept of the 'local gaze', which refers to how community members view and interpret tourism, tourist behaviour, and its impact (positive and negative) (Maoz, 2006; Stone & Nyaupane, 2019). When both tourists and locals adapt their perceptions and behaviours based on each other's (cultural) backgrounds, it leads to what is known as 'mutual gaze' (Chan, 2006; Maoz, 2006).

Similar to 'mutual gaze', the concept of 'reverse gaze' explores power dynamics in the relationship between tourists and hosts. This concept emphasizes that tourists can gain new perspectives and reflect on themselves through interacting with local culture (Gillespie, 2006; Höckert et al., 2017). However, the essence of this concept, introduced by Gillespie (2006) was to challenge the traditional power dynamics in tourism, particularly when tourists take photographs of local people without their consent, objectifying them as part of the tourist attraction. The reverse gaze occurs when locals respond to the photographers, influencing the tourists' experience while negotiating their own reactions (Gillespie,

2006; Pattison, 2013). This highlights that the interaction is a two-way street in the context of photography where both parties shape each other's perceptions and experiences. Moreover, Gillespie (2006) suggests that the reverse gaze may create discomfort for both tourists and hosts, potentially leading to an inauthentic experience.

Although the concept of reverse gaze is significant, there is a scarcity of empirical research on this topic. There is particular relevance to this study in relation to spiritual tourism, which involves integrating tourism with religious practices in order to deepen spirituality and create stronger connections with the divine (Norman, 2012). In recent years, the commercialization and commodification of religious rituals have resulted in the packaging of these rituals as spiritual tourism products (Qurashi, 2017; Redden, 2016). The concept of mutual gaze becomes relevant in this context since both tourists and hosts engage in reciprocal observations and interactions (Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi, 2011). Within spiritual tourism, both tourists and hosts co-perform these experiences (Buzinde et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2018), creating a particularly fascinating study of the reverse gaze.

This research note takes an autoethnographic approach by focusing on the *Ganga Aarti* ritual – a significant Hindu ceremony conducted along the River Ganges in Varanasi and Rishikesh, India. This ritual is

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dedicated to the goddess Ganga and involves prayers, music, chants, and offerings (Zara, 2015). The *Ganga Aarti* ritual takes place daily at sunset or after dusk attracting both tourists and locals, believers and non-believers. Through reflecting on my experiences, I aim to unravel the dynamics of the reverse gaze. By doing so, I hope to offer preliminary insights into its applicability in spiritual tourism and contribute to a deeper understanding of this concept.

Methodology

Autoethnography is a combination of research and writing that describes personal experiences to shed light on broader cultural aspects (Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011). This approach recognizes the complexity and meaning of stories, which provide valuable tools for authors and readers to make sense of their experiences (Chang, 2016). However, critics in academic literature including the tourism field have labelled it as narcissistic, individualistic, and self-centred (Atkinson, 1997). Some even called it a 'millennial methodology' (Griffin & Griffin, 2019). Despite this criticism, autoethnography challenges the notion that art and science are incompatible domains and serve as a bridge between them (Ellis et al., 2011). By utilizing personal experiences, self-reflection, and social analysis, researchers can explore and understand complex cultural phenomena (Sparkes, 2016). Importantly, this approach acknowledges the importance of individual perspectives and provides a platform for marginalized voices.

In this autoethnography, I took on the roles of a researcher and a curious traveller. In September 2022, I visited India mainly for my PhD research, but I was open to whatever experiences came my way. India might seem chaotic to some, but within that commotion, I discovered countless beautiful moments. That is the charm of this country. This journey turned out to be more than just research – it became a personal journey of healing and self-discovery. During my time in India, I learned about the *Ganga Aarti* from a local friend and decided to experience it by myself. This experience deeply affected me, not just in my mind, but also in my heart and soul. It led me to think about who I am as a researcher, a traveller, and most importantly, as a person. This experience made me realize how my thoughts and life experiences shape the way I view and learn about new things, especially from different cultures. Writing this autoethnography gives me the chance to explore how my background and perspectives shape my understanding of different cultures, spirituality, and life in general.

In this research note, I adopted Ellis et al.'s (2011) perspective that autoethnography typically involves

retrospectively and selectively writing about past experiences rather than intentionally undergoing an experience solely for the purpose of writing an autoethnography. To reconstruct and enhance my reflection on the experience, I utilized various sources such as my travel diary, photographs, and text messages shared with family and friends.

Findings and discussion

Exploring the reverse gaze and the essence of authenticity

Reflecting on the *Ganga Aarti* ritual, I recalled an interesting dynamic between tourist photographers and local subjects. As the ritual unfolded, the *pandits* executed a meticulously orchestrated ritual that involved the synchronized recitation of sacred mantras, symbolic displays of devotion through intricate hand gestures, and mesmerizing choreography with a gleaming, golden brass lamp. The harmonious blend of these elements created a powerful and enchanting ambience that left a lasting impression on all who witnessed it, including myself. Reflecting on this moment, I experienced what Perkins and Thorns (2001, p. 189) describe as an experience that is 'more on being, doing, touching and seeing rather than just "seeing"', resulting in a more profound and meaningful encounter. However, the ethereal ambience produced by these rituals was juxtaposed with the presence of tourists eager to capture the moment on their smartphones and cameras. This sight was not unexpected for it is a common inclination among tourists and even locals to seek the essence of this spiritual ceremony through the lens of photography or the recording of videos (Sharma et al., 2019; Zara, 2015). Here is an illustrative excerpt from my travel diary that effectively captures this reflection:

'As I stood there, totally captivated by the mesmerizing *Ganga Aarti* ritual, my eyes couldn't help but wander to the sea of raised smartphones and cameras. I have to admit, it kind of annoyed me at first. I mean, here I was, trying to soak in the magic of the moment, and these gadgets were blocking my view. But then, something caught my attention – the *pandits*. They just carried on, unaffected by all the clickety-clack of cameras. It was like they knew their role in this photo frenzy, embracing it with a mix of pride and acceptance. It actually added to the whole experience. Their grace and understanding infused the air with this incredible energy. It made me realize that sometimes, in the imperfect and chaotic moments, true beauty can be found'.

My recollection of this diary entry reminds me of the profound impact the *pandits'* response had on my understanding of the reverse gaze and authenticity of the

Ganga Aarti ritual. In this realization, I gained a deeper understanding of the (in)tangible and dynamic nature of the reverse gaze, as the *pandits'* influence appeared to lead the tourists (or at least myself) on a spiritually transformative journey. Initially, I had concerns about how photography might disturb the flow of the ritual and impacted the authenticity of the experience. Instead, recalling the *pandits'* guidance and their ability to navigate the tourists' actions of digitally capturing and/or documenting the moments, actually created a space for a more profound engagement with the spiritual essence of the ritual. Nevertheless, authenticity in the context of tourism experiences is a multifaceted and intricate subject. As Cohen (1988) argues, any modifications made using contemporary resources result in a departure from its original authenticity. Therefore, determining the authenticity of the *Ganga Aarti* ritual experience requires careful consideration of the extent to which it remains untouched by contemporary influences.

Navigating the reverse gaze and its unsettling emotions

Another notable reflection during the ritual was the observation of the intricate and captivating collective interaction inherent in the dynamics of reverse gaze. The *Ganga Aarti* ceremony promotes a sense of community by welcoming everyone, including tourists and locals, believers and non-believers, to participate in rhythmic clapping, singing devotional songs, and showing devotion to the divine by burning incense and presenting flowers. The phenomenon exemplifies what Ek et al. (2008) refer to as the 'performance turn', which emphasizes that tourists are not merely passive consumers of experiences but actively participate in co-producing, co-designing, and co-exhibiting them. Here is another snippet from my travel diary:

Ganga Aarti was incredible! The tourists joined the *pandits* in the rituals, singing, chanting, and playing traditional instruments. It was so amazing to see them fully embrace the role, wearing Indian ethnic wear and jewellery ... The atmosphere was electric with devotion, and everyone, tourists and locals, couldn't help but take pictures of this special moment. It felt like we were all part of something truly magical, where cultures came together in harmony.

Tourists now play active roles in the ritual experience, moving beyond passive sightseeing. They bring valuable personal resources (cultural, intellectual, and physical), emphasizing their new role (Prebensen et al., 2013). As seen here, tourists actively co-created the experience by engaging with the rituals, gestures, and

choreography, that contribute to the overall value of the experience (Neuhofer et al., 2013). As a result, the boundaries between observers and participants were blurred, creating a unique and immersive collective experience. These tourists now become the subjects of capture through the lenses of both locals and fellow tourists. In the framework of Gillespie's (2006) exploration of the reverse gaze, the locals' gaze towards the tourists could have evoked discomfort stemming from a latent sense of superiority. Despite the expectation of discomfort, I recalled nuanced emotions among the tourists as they experienced the reverse gaze. Some exuded pride and showed sincere investment in being part of this sacred tradition, radiating joy and reverence. This I believed was a testament to their deep appreciation for embracing this profound cultural heritage and the co-creator of the experience (Prebensen et al., 2013). In that moment, any discomfort dissipated, replaced by a sense of belonging and unity. Surprisingly, the reverse gaze served as a conduit for connection, understanding, and genuine appreciation. The *Ganga Aarti* ritual provided a collective experience that allowed for cultural immersion and spiritual transcendence at an entirely different level, defying preconceived notions.

This embodiment of the reverse gaze where both locals and tourists direct their gaze towards tourist-turned-performers, indeed offers a captivating perspective on cultural exchange. In this unique phenomenon, tourists transcend their traditional observer role and actively participate in cultural practices, all the while being observed by locals and fellow tourists. In reflecting on this, the term 'inverse gaze' appears fitting to describe this phenomenon. This brought to mind Moufakkir's (2013, p. 204) notes as 'the gaze of the gazer upon the gaze of the gazer gazing upon the object of the gaze', which delves into the motivations underlying both the tourists' and the locals' gazes. In the context of the *Ganga Aarti* ritual, this dynamic interplay of inverse gazes becomes a window into the profound quest for understanding and connection between tourists and locals in this spiritual setting.

Conclusion

This research note adds to our understanding of the reverse gaze phenomenon in the context of spiritual tourism. The findings suggest that the reverse gaze might not always result in inauthentic experiences and discomfort. Instead, it seems to facilitate dynamic interactions and meaningful connections among tourists and locals. The *pandits* played a crucial role in infusing the ritual with authenticity and guiding the tourists

towards a more profound engagement with spirituality. Moreover, this research note revealed a blurring of boundaries between tourists and locals, challenging conventional understandings of the reverse gaze. Tourists actively participated in the ritual, fully embracing the sacred tradition and seamlessly integrating themselves into the role of ritual performers. This unexpected level of participation resulted in transformative experiences for both tourists and locals, as the lines between different groups became fluid and the shared experience became a catalyst for collective connection and personal transformation. Nevertheless, the fact that the *Ganga Aarti* ritual, held daily and attracting numerous tourists and locals alike, ignited a thought-provoking question: Could the repetitive and frequent nature of the ritual diminish the significance and effectiveness of the reverse gaze concept in this specific setting? Further exploration through future research promises valuable insights into this intriguing topic. Additionally, examining the role of digital technology, such as photography and social media, in shaping the reverse gaze would provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of tourist-host interactions in the digital age. By examining the interactions between tourists and locals, this research note resonates with gaze theories, specifically those that delve into the dynamics of observing and being observed (Maoz, 2006; Urry, 1990). By intertwining the outcomes of this study with established gaze theories, we not only broaden our understanding of spiritual tourism but also contribute to the nuanced discourse surrounding the dynamics of perception and interaction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Reni Polus is a Teaching Fellow at the Department of Tourism, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Her research is primarily centred on exploring spirituality within tourism and leisure experiences, particularly in volunteering, pilgrimage, dark tourism and heritage tourism.

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