



NARRATING POLITICAL HISTORY ABOUT CONTESTED SPACE

Tourism Websites of India's Northeast

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Abstract: Those who have examined tourism for India's Northeast have primarily focused on issues of development. However, as a contested, postcolonial space, wherein multiple groups produce contending knowledge claims about political history and belonging, I examine the political implications of tourism for the Northeast. Specifically, I examine the histories offered within state-produced tourism websites for the seven states historically comprising the Northeast. I compare these to twelve corporate tourism websites for the Northeast. I argue that the state websites especially obscure competing knowledge claims and advance the hegemonic narrative of the nation. In doing so, they also reaffirm the state's racialized, sexualized production of knowledge about the Northeast. Ultimately, a focus on the political underscores the complexity of tourism for complex, postcolonial spaces such as India's Northeast.

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INTRODUCTION

Although tourism is increasingly embraced for economic growth (Sreekumar & Parayil, 2002), its significance well transcends the economic. Tourism promotional imagery is one of the most powerful factors shaping everyday life (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). States are interested in tourism for political as well as economic reasons, and today tourism is a central dimension of the politics of nation-building (Pretes, 2003; Wood, 1997). Critical scholars have especially focused on “state-sponsored image-work” within tourism and how it relates to given power structures: “National governments involved in tourism often become active producers of a version of history, heritage, and identity for the nation” (Fürsich & Robins, 2004, p. 139). These issues are particularly interesting for a heterogeneous, postcolonial country like India, which encompasses a vast array of stakeholders with competing narratives of the nation, its heritage, and its identity.

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However, there has been very little work exploring these political dimensions of tourism in India (but see, Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Bandyopadhyay, Morais, & Chick, 2008).

There is especially a dearth of work on these questions for India's Northeast, where arguably they are the most apropos. Fairly isolated from the national mainstream, the Northeast is considered a "postcolonial construct that emerged out of the hasty process of British withdrawal from the subcontinent . . . [where, with its predominance of 'scheduled tribes',] India looks less and less India and more like the highlands of Southeast Asia" (Bhaumik, 2005, p. 144). This region has a troubled relationship with the central government, as different groups have launched a series of separatist and independence movements for a number of decades. Indeed, the Northeast constitutes India's longest theatre of insurgency. Yet, while conflicts in Kashmir and Punjab are internationalized, the Northeast conflict remains invisible on the international stage (Banerjee, 2001, p. 133). The central government itself tends to see the Northeast through the lens of terrorism and responds primarily through military means (Oommen, 2005), though recently it has also adopted a more developmentalist approach (i.e., the notion that successful economic development will quell political unrest). Particularly in the last decade, hence, the state has started to incorporate the Northeast into its tourism efforts. While scholars have considered these developments, particularly in terms of implementation, impediments, and associated social ills (Barman & Goswami, 1998; Megu, 2007; Patnaik, 2007), the political dimension remains unaddressed. That is, from the perspective of *political* goals, how do the government's tourism promotion strategies narrate the Northeast as a part of the nation? What are the histories created of the Northeast as a naturalized and depoliticized region of the nation-state?

Additionally, the Internet is becoming an increasingly important medium for the dissemination of tourism promotion materials, and the Indian government is no different, with the Northeast states all creating official tourism websites for their respective jurisdictions. Scholars argue that the Internet is "drastically transforming the distribution and marketing of tourism products" (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007, p. 118), and travelers themselves are increasingly relying on the Internet to make tourism decisions (Alderman & Modlin, 2008). Yet, the growing social significance of the Internet in the trans-border traffic in (tourism-produced) national narratives of India has yet to be fully examined (but see Henderson (2007)). Moreover, given the relative marginalization of the Northeast within the national terrain, these websites now provide a central source of visibility for the region as part of the nation. While not as prolific as corporate tourism websites, they nevertheless constitute an official government discourse, and thus can claim an authority of representation regarding the Northeast that corporate websites cannot.

Sociologically, what is especially compelling is that while emanating from a broader development strategy constructed by the central government, tourism website construction is actually charged to the region's state governments. Rather than understanding them simply

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