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Empowering the empowered? Slum tourism and the depoliticization of poverty

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ABSTRACT

Mumbai's Dharavi slum occupies a plot half the size of Central Park. It is home to one million people, with almost half of residents living in spaces under 10 m^2, making it over six times as dense as daytime Manhattan. Using ethnographic fieldwork and online analysis, this article examines slum tourism and the perceptions and experiences of western visitors. Local tour operators emphasize the productivity of the slum, with its annual turnover of $665 million generated from its hutment industries. Its poor sanitation, lack of clean water, squalid conditions and overcrowding are ignored and replaced by a vision of resourcefulness, hard work and diligence. This presentation of the slum as a hive of industry is so successful that visitors overlook, or even deny, its obvious poverty. Dharavi is instead perceived as a manufacturing hub and retail experience; and in some cases even romanticized as a model of contentment and neighbourliness, with western visitors transformed by 'life-changing', 'eye-opening' and 'mind-blowing' experiences. This article concludes that the potential of slum tours as a form of international development is limited, as they enable wealthy middle-class westerners to feel 'inspired', 'uplifted' and 'enriched', but with little understanding of the need for change.

1. Introduction

I'm on a flight from London to Mumbai. As the aeroplane descends, I look out across a vast, continuous landscape of brown corrugated rooftops and blue plastic sheeting. This is India's infamous slums. The plane lands, I collect my luggage and find a taxi. On the way to the hotel, the driver shows me various temples, mosques and attractions. He points out a modern skyscraper and tells me that this is 'Antilla', the world's most expensive residential property, with an estimated value of US$2 billion. It is the home of Mukesh Ambani, an Indian businessman and one of the richest people in the world, with a net worth of around US$20 billion (Forbes, 2016). Although only four members of the Ambani family live here, 600 workers are employed to take care of its 27 floors, three helipads, six floors of car parking, hanging gardens, gymnasiums, theater, and ballroom. How can this be? How did this person come to amass so much wealth in a country where over 360 million people live on less than US$1.25 a day (Rangarajan, 2014). Why do so many people continue to live in abject poverty? India is not the only country that grapples with this problem, nor the only place where there are vast differences between the richest and the poorest, although Ambani's net worth is gigantic, even by global standards. It is not unusual to see great wealth butt up against gruelling poverty in India, yet this was a remarkable juxtaposition. Later that day, as I read my guidebook, I come across a charity that offers tours of Dharavi, reportedly Asia's largest slum. I book a place. This article provides an account of my visit and the empirical analyses that followed. The first part provides a critical overview of the literature, starting with the historical context of slums and research on slum tourism. In the second half, I introduce the case study of Dharavi and present my findings, which are drawn from an ethnographic account of the slum tour and a thematic analysis of over 200 TripAdvisor reviews. In this section, I argue that the tour operators and tourists jointly construct a view of poverty that is normalized, even romanticized. It is seen as neutral, natural and benign, rather than something deadly, which diminishes wellbeing and threatens life. Poverty is depoliticized. Visitors leave the slum feeling happy and satisfied to have witnessed the 'real' and 'authentic' India, but the potential for development is hindered as residents are left with little prospect of change.

2. Slums: a global issue

According to the United Nations, a slum is a place where people have insecure residential status. This means that they do not hold a legal title to their property or any legal right to the land that it sits on. Slums are characterized by inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, poorly built housing and overcrowding (United Nations, 2016). In 2003, the United Nations undertook a groundbreaking study that examined the challenge of slums. More than a decade later, it is still

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grappling with these challenges as the number of those living in slums continues to grow (United Nations, 2016) and has now reached over one billion people (Perry, 2015). This accounts for 33 per cent of the global urban population (United Nations, 2013). This is a particular issue for the developing world, where slum inhabitants experience multiple deprivations including overcrowding, lack of clean water, poor sanitation, inadequate access to food, education and health services, and reduced social and political rights due to discrimination (Riley et al., 2007). All of this leads to disease, illiteracy, unemployment and crime. McLean (2006) states that by 2020, slums will be the primary habitat of those in the developing world, a view shared by Davis (2006). If anything, this is probably an understatement. In 2007, sociologists argued that the global urban population had exceeded the rural population for the first time (United Nations, 2008). Back in 2008, statistics revealed that more than 70 per cent of Africa's urban population lived in slums (Cities Alliance website). Official figures notoriously underestimate numbers, which is a point that was clearly made by a census carried out by slum inhabitants in India (Perry, 2015). Global population forecasts also vary. Some estimate that urban slums will account for well over two billion people by 2050 (Perry, 2015), whilst others have argued that the three billion mark will be reached as early as 2030 (United Nations, 2008). Either way, it is widely accepted that slums are a huge and growing problem.

The emergence and growth of slums are directly shaped by global factors that relate to patterns of development. Urban historian Mike Davis (2006) provides a vividly detailed account of the growth of slums, which are caused by the rapid urbanization of the planet as a result of industrialization. This process has been accelerated by neoliberal capitalism (Robinson, 2012). Urban populations are displaced as corporate development forces the poor from the land on which their homes are built. At the same time, the rural poor migrate towards cities in search of work. People are simultaneously pushed out and pulled in. According to Davis (2006), this might be more accurately thought of as cities migrating to people, not the other way around. The expansion of urban centers results in less space and more demand for land, and the inevitable growth of slums. This issue is set to deepen, with neoliberalism adopted by (or imposed upon) most governments around the world (Harvey, 2005; Siddiqui, 2012). This political system sees the old industrial countries of the West, fuelled by untrammeled corporate power, exploiting the advantages offered by developing countries including the abundance of raw materials, cheap and unregulated labor and lower tax. It leads to continual urbanization at an unprecedented rate, with cities in the developing world expanding under the pressure of deregulated market economies.

Dharavi slum in Mumbai is the focus of this article and corresponds to this pattern. Historically, Mumbai was comprised of seven islands, which became joined over time as commercialisation increased. It now occupies a long and narrow strip of land in the Arabian Sea. The British colonial government took control of the peninsula city center for trading, and wealthy Brits and Indians built residential developments along the coast to expand the suburbs (Risbud, 2003). This forced the residents, the factories, and their workers to head north. These displaced people settled on a patch of land between Mumbai's two main suburban railway lines, establishing Dharavi in 1882. Over the years, it has continued to grow, as more of the urban population is displaced - no longer by colonial powers but by the same driving force: capitalism. Some argue that this is a form of 'neocolonialism', described as the use of economic and political pressure by advanced capitalist countries to control or influence less developed countries, thereby exploiting labor, materials, and markets (Portes, 2016). According to Davis, 10–12 million of Mumbai's residents live in slums (2006:23). Echanove and Srivastava (2014) estimate that this accounts for 60 per cent of the city's population. This number is set to rise dramatically if population estimates are correct. Davis (2006) claims that Indian slums continue to grow 250 per cent faster than the overall population. A Harvard Business School report predicts that a further 200 million people are expected to move from the Indian countryside to Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai over the next ten years (Iyer and Macomber, 2010). Historical records show that the population of Mumbai's suburbs rose by an astronomical 3555 per cent between 1911 and 2011 (Shaikh, 2014). By 2030, the city is estimated to have a population in excess of 28 million (Hindustan Times, 2014).

3. Slum tourism: arguments and evidence

The practice of slum tourism is not new. It began in Victorian London, with tours around the squalid East End of the city by the upper classes, politicians, clergymen, academics, social reformers, journalists, scientists and writers (Koven, 2004). Over the next hundred years, formalized tours began in specific parts of the world, but it has only been relatively recently that slum tours have become highly organized and widely marketed. They are now run by private tour companies, charities, and non-governmental organizations and are a common feature of tourist itineraries, alongside museums and religious sites. In this contemporary sense, slum tourism is understood as an activity in which tourists from the Global North visit impoverished urban centers in the Global South (Steinbrink et al., 2012). Slum tours in their current incarnation began in South Africa in 1991 during the final throes of apartheid, when visitors were taken to townships and non-white areas in major cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg (Rogerson, 2004; Butler, 2012; Rolfes, 2010).

This means that slum tourism, as we know it today, is relatively new and currently under-researched, with the body of academic literature only recently beginning to take shape. This small but growing debate is dominated by ethical discussions. Some scholars point to the voyeuristic appeal of slum tourism, reflecting on why people want to visit slums, what pleasure could be derived from it and whether they should be allowed (Dovey and King, 2012; Mendes, 2010; Steinbrink, 2012). The combination of pleasure, leisure and suffering is an obvious point of tension (Privitera, 2015). However, this viewpoint overlooks the longstanding interest in slum life. From the poignant evocations of 19th century London by Charles Dickens, to the dramatization of Indian slum life by film director Danny Boyle, there has always been an interest in slums. Indeed Koven (2004) shows that pioneering slum tours in Victorian London were as much for entertainment as they were for social reform. Seaton (2012) claims that curiosity in slums preceded social philanthropy. The literature criticizing slum tourism neglects this rich history. Mainstream discussions of slum tourism focus on a straightforward and superficial debate about whether it is voyeuristic or not (Lancaster, 2007; Pickard, 2007; Gross, 2010). This echoes early academic work on tourism in the 1970s, which considered whether it was a good thing (Dyson, 2012). This results in a moralizing viewpoint. Lancaster uses the criticism of others as a proxy for his own disapproval, reporting that some critics have accused Reality Tours (the tour company at the center of this article) of 'crimes against humanity' for invading the privacy of slum residents and treating them 'like animals', concluding that the tour operators were 'parasites' and should be imprisoned (2007:online). Whilst this is clearly excessive, it is worth noting the depth of feeling here, that much of the academic and mainstream literature holds the tourists and tour companies to account (Burgold and Rolfes, 2013), rather than governments, which are strangely relinquished. This is noteworthy since slums are the result of rampant capitalism, inadequate urban planning and a lack of investment in essential public services. Slums grow in cities. Cities are not built over slums. Indian government officials have been audacious, then, in their claims that tour operators should be punished (Basu, 2012). This standpoint fails to recognize that many companies in this arena adopt a business model where profits from the tours are put back into the local community (Frenzel and Blakeman, 2015). The aforementioned Reality Tours won a 'responsible tourism award' for its ethical operations. Research by Rolfes (2010) demonstrates that many tour operators express disdain for voyeurism and display a moral