

Tourist-Host Transactions: The Boatmen of Varanasi as Cultural Brokers¹

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Abstract

Contemporary studies of tourism in the 'Third World' often focus on the far-reaching economic, cultural and environmental consequences of tourism on local populations. Terms such as 'guests' and 'hosts' are commonly employed describing the relations between Western tourists and the local communities they visit. Several scholars have argued that guest-host interactions reflect a relation of domination in which, much like imperialism, wealthy Western tourists travel in search of the exotic Orient. The tourists are then served and catered for by local communities who are dependent on their business. Such polarities imply that tourists and hosts are distinct groups, each with their own wants, needs and ultimately experiences of the 'other'. They also tend to privilege the 'guests' as the purveyors of change, while the creative and innovative practices of the host group are rendered invisible. In this paper I examine the boatmen of Varanasi and their role as cultural brokers, negotiating the sacred city of Varanasi for visitors including pilgrims, domestic and foreign tourists. It looks at the relationships between the boatmen and the visitors and the multiple strategies and tactics that boatmen have developed to satisfy and influence their needs and desires to their own advantage. Such techniques, however, vary according to the visitors and their desired experience. Thus, the boatmen are quick to 'tune in' to whom they are

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dealing with. Moreover, their close encounters with tourists enable them to critically reflect on both (their view of) Western culture and their own local culture, offering a unique insight into such encounters.

Introduction

Contemporary studies of tourism in the 'Third World' often focus on the far-reaching economic, cultural and environmental consequences of tourism on local populations. Terms such as 'guests' and 'hosts' are commonly employed to describe the relations between Western tourists and the local communities they visit. Several scholars have argued that the guest-host interaction reflects a relation of domination in which, much like imperialism, wealthy Western tourists travel in search of the exotic. The tourists are then served and catered for by local communities who are dependent on their business (Silver 1993; Bruner 1991). Such studies tend to situate uneven power relations embedded in tourism within the larger forces of world systems, globalization and nation building strategies (Markula 1997; Nash 1989; Palmer 1989). Such polarities imply that tourists and hosts are distinct groups, each with their own wants, needs and ultimately experiences of the 'other'. They also tend to privilege the guests as the purveyors of change, while the creative and innovative practices of the host group are rendered invisible.

Recent studies (Werner 2003; Chambers 2003) have attempted to correct such binary analysis by identifying groups, called mediators, who operate between and outside the restrictive categories of 'guest' and 'host'. These mediators, it is argued, are actively engaged in promoting and developing tourism in their respective countries. The category of mediators includes governments, guidebooks, travel agencies, tour guides, travel writers and people involved in the transportation business (Werner 2003: 2; Chambers 2000: 11). Werner notes that certain common tourist tropes are often replicated by mediators who seek to entice the tourist to their countries. Thus, local tour operators actively promote a romantic vision of the 'natives' in order to tap into tourists' desires. Local people are portrayed as leading a life steeped in tradition surrounded by natural landscapes and unaffected by the onslaught of modernity. It seems that Werner's analysis ultimately reinforces the ways in which tourist marketing (whether promoted from abroad or at home) continues to condition and prescribe the terms of engagement between tourists and hosts. Although local elites (as mediators) are given agency and demonstrate a degree of control in the tourist discourse, the subalterns, such as locals working in the informal sector in the tourist

industry, remain compliant.² Thus, the reader is left thinking the locals have no choice but to adhere to the tourist discourse, propagated by local elites. Once again such analysis suggests passivity on part of the local people and dismisses their ability to counter and adapt the changes brought about by the dominant tourist discourse. The implicit assumption being that prior to the indiscriminate onslaught of tourism such communities lived in harmony.

In this article, I examine the boatmen of Varanasi and their role as cultural brokers negotiating the sacred city of Varanasi for a range of visitors to the city, such as pilgrims, domestic and foreign tourists. By focusing on the boatmen I hope to demonstrate that the existence of asymmetrical power relations does not necessarily entail the subordination and passivity of the 'other'. On the contrary, the dominant tourist discourse emerging from First World countries is often creatively appropriated, subverted and manipulated by marginal groups, such as the boatmen, to further their own economic and social interests.³ The tourist discourse is employed by boatmen, not only to differentiate between different categories of visitors (i.e. turned back on them) but also to enhance what might be called 'cultural service delivery' for these visitors. This can be elucidated when we leave aside binary models that focus solely on the consequences of tourism on local populations; and instead examine the actual ways in which individuals and groups relate to each other at the local level within the social spaces that Pratt (1988) identifies as 'contact zones'.⁴

The article begins by examining the ways in which boatmen interact with visitors from within India, namely pilgrims and domestic tourists. Such an examination provides insight into the historical and social setting of Varanasi and the pivotal role of the boatmen within the pilgrimage industry. Next, I explore the various ways foreign visitors experience the city and its people. I begin by briefly charting the similarities and differences between colonial and contemporary travelers to Varanasi, in terms of their motivations, needs and wants. I then turn to examine contemporary experiences of travelers in Varanasi and their interactions with boatmen. I focus on

² By tourist discourse I am referring to the dominating discourse emanating from Western countries that serves to reproduce a series of Orientalist tropes. It is largely produced and disseminated by the travel industry and media, as well as travel talk (see, Bhattacharyya 1997, Echtner & Prasad 2003).

³ In Varanasi the boatmen are considered a ritually and socially low occupational group who belong to the Mallah sub-caste.

⁴ The concept of 'contact zones' is described by Pratt (1988) as the 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Pratt 1988: 4). For Pratt, whose main focus is travel writing during the colonial period, the notion of 'contact zones' provides a way to avoid the binary categories that suggest a spatial and temporal separateness between colonised and colonizer. Rather, she seeks to 'foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination' (1988: 7).

the multiple strategies and tactics that boatmen have developed to influence and satisfy the needs and desires of their foreign patrons to their own advantage. The close encounters that boatmen have with tourists enable them to critically reflect on both (their view of) Western culture and their own local culture, thus offering a unique insight into how the tourist discourse operates at the local level.

My research is based on extensive field work carried out over a year in the city. The research was based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with boatmen, tourists, pilgrims and locals. In addition I draw on guidebooks, travelogues and novels to examine the way in which the tourist discourse has been constructed and disseminated, as well as my previous experiences as a ‘traveler’ and tour guide in India.

The Setting

The majestic setting of the holy city of Varanasi has captured the imagination of both pilgrims and foreign visitors for centuries. Among the plethora of books, travelogues and pictorial accounts portraying the city, one recent local publication clearly stands out. This comic book, written in English, is aptly titled: ‘*A Pilgrimage to Kashi: History, Mythology and Culture of the Strangest and most Fascinating City in India*’. The comic scenes illustrated in colorful cartoons provide a reliable and amusing take on the city’s cultural, historical and social settings. Central to this beautifully crafted work is a boat ride on the River Ganges employed as a narrative device through which the reader is introduced to the city.

In brief, the narrative follows the experiences of a middle-upper class Hindu family from Bombay, which arrives to the city in order to ritually spread the ashes of a recently deceased relative. Upon their arrival at the train station the family is met by uncle Virendra (the father’s wayward brother) who is a resident of Varanasi. The uncle suggests a boat ride as the quickest and most convenient way to see Varanasi and at the same time perform pilgrimage along the river and visit the major sacred bathing ghats (riverfront landings).

The family arrives to Assi ghat at sunrise to hire a boat. On the ghat they are approached by a boatman. What follows is a comic description of the customary haggling between the boatman and the uncle. The family is then taken on the boat where Uncle Virendra explains the history and myths associated with the city, the ghats and the river. Thus, as the boat ride proceeds the reader is given a comprehensive view (through cartoon scenes) and explanations (through speech captions and bubbles) of the sacred complex of Varanasi. Familiar river scenes are shown

throughout the boat ride, such as a cow carcass floating in the river, the renowned cremation ghats and locals and pilgrims performing ritual ablutions along the ghats. One scene colorfully shows a boat packed with foreign tourists, suitably depicted wearing modern clothes and absorbed in photographing and filming the exotic scenery of the riverfront. Another comic scene shows two young local men on the ghat attempting to initiate a conversation with two female backpackers.

Throughout the boat ride extensive explanations and stories about the city are told by uncle Virendra. The boatman's explanations are equally informative, although they often differ from the uncle's classic view of the city. Thus, when uncle Virendra declares: 'The magnetism of sacred Banaras⁵ attracts great numbers of saintly men and women'; the boatman brazenly adds: 'Not only saints, the town is also full of crooks'. As the boat ride continues uncle Virendra becomes increasingly frustrated by the boatman, saying: 'this know it all boatman is getting on my nerves'. The constant interruptions by the boatman undermine the uncle's authoritative explanations about the city. Finally, uncle Virendra erupts and tells him to 'shut up!'.

In this paper I examine these scenes with an eye to the ethnographic present looking at how boatmen engage with visitors to the city. Interestingly, while the role of the boatman in the comic as an informal guide is cleverly depicted, there is hardly a mention of the motorboats full of pilgrims who frequent the major bathing ghats. This clearly glosses over an important aspect of the city-scape and the pivotal role that boatmen play in the large pilgrimage industry. In the following I will examine the ways in which boatmen engage with pilgrims. This will serve to contextualize the role of boatmen as cultural brokers; as people who perform a range of services, from the purely functional, i.e., taking people from one place to another, to the more comprehensive, such as assisting in rituals or organising hotels, music lessons and shopping.

Interaction with Pilgrims

The city of Varanasi has been a major centre of pilgrimage for more than two millennia. Since the advent of railroads built during the colonial period and improved communication networks across the subcontinent, pilgrimage in India has expanded markedly. Contemporary pilgrimage is organised in the manner of package tours. Pilgrims, many of whom are villagers coming from all over India, may visit more than twenty holy sites across the country in so many days. Such haste means that pilgrims generally stay in Varanasi for no more than one day. Boats are therefore

⁵ The city was known as Benares during British rule; it is still referred to by various names, most common of which are Banaras/Kashi/Varanasi.

extremely useful as they provide the fastest and most convenient form of transport from site to site. In the past decade more boatmen have begun operating motorboats (as opposed to only rowboats) to accommodate the needs of these numerous fleeting pilgrims.

Some pilgrims coming to the city are connected to, and reside with a hereditary priest (*tirth puruhit*). Others reside in the numerous pilgrim hostels (*dharamasalas*) across the city and these make all the necessary arrangements for the pilgrims to visit the essential sacred sites. Boatmen may receive passengers through such connections to pilgrim hostels and hereditary Brahmin priests.⁶ Pilgrims who are not affiliated with any institution or person are much more vulnerable to local chicanery. Such is often the case with smaller groups of pilgrims arriving to the main ghat area (Dashawamedh ghat), where they are closely monitored by boatmen and local ghat priests. These ghat functionaries have developed an elaborate secret language designed to communicate in coded terms the socio-economic status of pilgrims and the potential economic gain from these unaware visitors (see for example, Mehotra 1993). As we shall see in more detail later, such practices of observing and objectifying visitors are significant for understanding contemporary practices of the boatmen involving tourist-host relations. In the case of mass pilgrim package tours their local affiliations make them less susceptible to such trickery; and time limitations means they follow a tight itinerary in the city, adhering to a commonly prescribed route consisting of worship at the major temples and bathing ghats.

Of any one group, the boatmen possibly have the closest interaction with these groups of pilgrims as their services extend beyond strictly transport functions and include services similar to those of a tour guide. Following Cohen (1985), it is useful to examine the role of tour guides within what he calls the leadership and mediatory spheres. In the leadership sphere, Cohen identifies instrumental and social components. The instrumental component notes a tour guide's duty to ensure the 'smooth accomplishment of the tour'. The social component is related to the guide's 'responsibility for cohesion and morale of the touring party' (Cohen 1985: 11-12).

These categories clearly apply to our case. In Varanasi it is the role of the boatmen to lead the pilgrims safely to and from places of worship and to ensure that no one drowns or slips while bathing in the river. It is also common to see and hear the boatmen prompt the pilgrim party to shout familiar slogans, such as 'Ganga Ma ki – Jay' (victory to Mother Ganges) or 'Hara Hara

⁶ On some ghats, such as Raj ghat and Guy ghat, pilgrim groups are assigned to respective boatmen according to a rotation system known as *pari*.

Mahadev' (hail Lord Shiva), thus creating and contributing to a feeling of excitement, elation and expectation among the pilgrims.

In the mediatory sphere Cohen suggests a division between interactional and communicative elements. The first denotes the guide's role as 'middleman between his party and the local population, sites and institutions' (Cohen 1985: 13). The communicative element applies to the tour guide's task as culture broker drawing attention to, interpreting and explaining places of interest for the visitor. Finally, Cohen tellingly notes that such activities may 'have manipulative significance [as] information imparted is rarely purely neutral' (Cohen 1985:14-15).

Boatmen, however, are not formal tour guides; their knowledge of the major languages spoken by pilgrims derives from informal learning and years of experience. So too is the manner in which they selectively impart information about the various sites along the riverfront. On one occasion when I joined a group of pilgrims from the western state of Maharashtra, one of the boatmen stopped the motorboat and ceremoniously pointed towards Ram ghat. In a mixture of Marthi-Hindi he informed the pilgrims of the ghat's religious significance in an excited tone. 'This is the very ghat where Lord Ram and Sita (his wife) departed on a boat to perform a pilgrimage (*yatra*), just as you are doing'. He then briefly narrated the story duly emphasising that following the legendary boat ride where the boatman offered his humble services to the god Ram, who in return blessed the boatman (*kewat*) and gave him a donation (*dan*) for his service and devotion. The boatman then took out a brass pot, filled it with auspicious river water (*Ganga jal*), and began sprinkling the pilgrims while imploring them to make a similar offering themselves '*Kewat dan dena; Kewat da dena*' (give a donation to the boatman), blessing those who put coins into the golden pot. The boatman was able to collect 170 Rs in this way – a considerable sum.

The boatman clearly suggested a parallel between Lord Ram's mythical pilgrimage and that of the pilgrims to his advantage. Pilgrims are not new to such tactics, however, and some remarked at his craftiness. Despite this most felt compelled to donate some coins to the boatman for blessing them with the holy river water. Such practice may indeed be akin to what Appadurai (1990: 101) calls 'coercive subordination'. This a practice where the subordinate (in the extreme case, beggars) bless and praise 'their (potential) benefactors...[trapping] them in the cultural implication of their roles as superiors, that is, in the obligation to be generous'. It is important to note, however, that a position of subordination is assumed strategically. In their capacity as

cultural brokers boatmen also assume a position of authority when guiding pilgrims, selectively informing them about the city to their advantage.

The boatmen's role as informal guides should not be underestimated. They play a vital role in directing pilgrims to various temples, minding their belongings and providing them access to religious paraphernalia and souvenirs. Such advice and direction imparted by boatmen serve to establish a degree of trust, much needed for the smooth operation of a tour. Moreover, establishing trust is an indirect form of gaining control and exercising manipulation, which boatmen are careful to exploit when taking pilgrims to certain shops (from which they receive commission) en route to temples.

An examination of the boatmen's role in relation to pilgrims provides important insight into the culturally specific role and agency of boatmen as cultural brokers. The boatmen, however, interact with a variety of 'guests' who visit the city. In addition to pilgrims, a large number of tourists visit Varanasi also. In general, it is possible to divide tourists into three categories: package holiday tourists, backpackers and domestic tourists. Boatmen have more to do with the latter two categories since package tours have their private formal guides and their boat rides booked in advance. Let me begin with domestic tourists and compare them to other visitors to the city, such as pilgrims and foreign tourists.

Applying the category of domestic tourism to the Indian context is somewhat problematic because it is often hard to clearly distinguish between pilgrimage and tourism. Nevertheless, there are some distinct characteristics that are worth noting. Tourists largely come from the socially mobile urban middle class of Indian society and generally visit Varanasi for longer periods than pilgrims (several days). They often travel in small groups (such as families), coming to the city during national holidays. In Varanasi, both pilgrims and tourists participate in the tourist/pilgrimage industry, consuming souvenirs that capture and symbolise their time in Varanasi. In terms of transport, although their purpose of travel may differ (and at times overlap), both pilgrims and tourists use boats. It is important to stress, however, the different nature of their interactions with boatmen. Pilgrims generally travel en mass and pay much less than tourists. Boatmen will, therefore, fill their boats as much as possible with pilgrims in order to make a trip worthwhile. The price for pilgrims is generally fixed in advance, whereas with tourists it is much more flexible. The manner in which domestic tourists visit Varanasi and interact with the boatmen is thus more comparable to that of foreign tourists. This is particularly notable when we consider some of the similarities and differences between pilgrims and tourists (domestic and

foreign) in terms of motivations, needs and desires, which in turn affect the way in which boatmen interact and deal with such.

Similar to the middle class family from Bombay described in the comic book, many domestic tourists use the opportunity of being in the city to perform certain rituals. Thus, their experience of Varanasi is often one that combines both religious and tourist practices. On several occasions, domestic tourists noted to me that despite their modern sensibilities, which due to pollution fears prevent them from bathing in or drinking the sacred river water, visiting the city is still a spiritual and religious experience for them. In other words, one experience does not necessarily displace the other; on the contrary, for many domestic tourists the tourist experience is enhanced and complemented by the religious one.

Indeed, tourists' motivations and experiences, whether domestic or foreign, should not be conceived in binary terms, such as sacred and profane. As Smith has argued (Smith 1992: 2), the domain of the sacred and spiritual motivations for travel should not be 'restricted to the pilgrim'. One of the primary motivations underlying modern tourism, contends MacCannell (1999), is the search for an authentic experience. This, he argues, is partly the result of the 'instability and inauthenticity' of modernity, which is characterized by alienation, loss of meaning and nostalgic yearning for the past. MacCannell (1976: 42-48) also suggests that the practice and motivations underlying tourism bear much in common with religious experience and ritual conduct. Similarly, other scholars have noted the interface between modern tourism and pilgrimage in terms of motivations and experience, arguing that the search for the sacred and spiritual is a central feature of the tourist journey (Graburn 1989; Smith 1992; Turner & Turner 1978). In such cases, spirituality and religious experience are often part of the 'multiple and changing motivations of the travelers, whose interests and activities may switch from tourist to pilgrim and vice versa' (Smith 1992: 4). Not surprisingly, tourist destinations have often been marketed as places of spirituality, purity and personal transformation (Bruner 1991).

The need for experiencing an authentic setting is part of what Urry characterised as the 'tourist gaze'. The tourist gaze, he argues, is premised upon difference, 'constructed in relation to its opposite' (Urry 1990: 2). It is not surprising then, that Varanasi, with its riverfront vista and variety of exotic ritual practices and oriental scenes has captured the imagination of foreign visitors. However, the tourist gaze, as Urry reminds us, is itself contingent upon historical and social circumstances. In the case of Varanasi, it is therefore important to make a distinction

between the needs and practices of pilgrims and tourists (domestic and foreign), as well as between colonial and contemporary tourists.

The mode of travel, motivations, expectations and experiences of colonial travelers to Varanasi were, in part, different to those of the contemporary traveler. Perhaps the most important difference is how the contact zone is described and experienced by the colonial travelers. In colonial travelogues and guidebooks the city and its inhabitants are commonly described as essentially different from Europeans (see for example, Caine 1898; Havell 1905; Minturn 1858). The population was there to be gazed upon, from a distance; removed from the colonial traveler in time (as primitives) and space (the boat or the hotels). For them Varanasi resided in, and captured the past while the activities and practices of the locals provided a colourful and animated backdrop to this magnificent stage: a living museum worthy of being visited, observed and commented upon by the colonial traveler. Thus, the tourist gaze served to reinforce the authority and superiority of the knowledgeable and rational European traveler.⁷

While much of the imperial depictions of the Orient avoid mentioning close interaction with locals, contemporary tourists to Third World countries actively search for such local encounters (Echtner & Prasad 2003). The contact zone becomes the focus of attention; and the local 'authentic' people, items and experiences the objects of desire and consumption.

Not surprisingly, much post-colonial travel literature on India and the Indian experience is replete with tourist-host encounters.⁸ Perhaps the most prominent example of consuming India is found in the sixties' counterculture period. During that period India and Indian culture were not simply objects to be gazed upon, but people also sought to experience India through spirituality, drugs, music, food, clothing and encounters with the locals. As Stephens argues, India signified freedom and an opportunity to 'counter all restrictions of "Western" culture. As such, 'India came to be seen as an "uncontaminated" place, far from the polluting influences of money, a place beyond the market where the ethic of "free" could flourish supreme' (Stephens 1998: 53).

The perception of India as the 'antithesis' of the West was shared by both the hippie generation and the previous colonial one. Under the colonial gaze India was perceived as backward, its inhabitants less evolved and therefore needing to be redeemed (the 'civilising mission') and

⁷ Peter Friedlander has clearly demonstrated the need to acknowledge the variety of gazes and experiences of colonial travelers in India during the early colonial period (See Friedlander 2004).

⁸ See for example Newby (1966); Jayapal (2000).

disciplined by the colonial regime and its 'superior' culture. However, the sixties' counterculture celebrated such 'backwardness' as signs of spirituality, lack of materialism and harmony with nature. As we shall see, such perceptions of India as a place of discovery (and self-discovery) and spirituality continue to inform contemporary travel discourse and patterns of consumption. At the same time, examining the experience of travelers in the contact zone reveals the often unpleasant gap between representations and reality.

Experiencing Varanasi: The sacred and the profane

Lisa, a woman from Germany with whom I had a conversation, told me about her motivations and experience of the city:

I came to learn Sanskrit; I love this place, the river is wonderful, no cars, silent, fresh air, open space, and when the sun comes out there is always a kind of lazy Sunday afternoon atmosphere...One boatman I met, he works to live, and does not live to work, like we do in West...The only thing that bothers me here are the motorboats that create noise and air pollution.

For a person on holiday, one who does not need to work and provide the basic amenities for her/his family, such as Lisa, it is easy to experience the riverfront as a spiritual vacation spot. For Lisa, the boatmen are objectified and delineate the contrast between East and West. Uneven economic relationships between tourists and locals obviously contribute to the way in which the former exercise their gaze upon the different and underprivileged 'reality' of the peoples in India. This 'reality' is seen, experienced, consumed and constructed on pre-conceived notions about India and the 'other'.

Like other tourists, Lisa complains about the presence of motorboats on the river, saying that they pollute the riverscape. For her these motorboats are signs of the corrupting forces of modernity and progress. Such corrupting foreign influences are never depicted or portrayed in travel advertising and representations of the holy city. Even in the comic book, pilgrims figure only as part of the riverfront scenery, however the motorboats are conspicuously absent from the riverscape. The 'other' is typically associated with manual labor, such as the boatman rowing his boat, and it is the West that is associated with mechanization, such as motorboats. For tourists, such motorboats spoil the atmosphere of the riverfront precisely because they puncture the romantic notion of Varanasi as a place suspended in time, authentic, unchanging and pure. It appears that many tourists are unaware that these motorboats are vital to the boatmen's livelihood, especially for those who live and operate their boats from distant, non-touristic ghats,

providing services for pilgrims. Ironically, it is the pious package tour pilgrims who use motorboats in order to complete their pilgrimage itinerary according to plan.

Several other tourists I spoke to expressed their dismay and disappointment with their experience of the riverscape and interactions with boatmen. When I explained my research topic to one tourist, he responded by asking: 'Is your research about the cheating by boatmen?' On another occasion a Canadian backpacker said that his expectations from the city had largely derived from tales from friends at home and other fellow travelers in India. They had praised the unique experience of boating and the special atmosphere on the river Ganges, especially regarding the practice of releasing candles into the river at dusk. Upon arrival to the city, he went directly from the train station to the riverfront to catch the sunrise and morning religious ceremonies. He recounted his experience:

Boatmen kept approaching me and asking 'hello you want boat? you want boat?' I wanted to take a boat by myself as I thought it would be special, but I really don't like the constant hassling and discussions about money. For me Banaras is supposed to be a holy place - the cremations, the Ganga, the boats - but when it's all about cheating and money, money, money, I just shut off.

Here the experience in the contact zone suggests a dissonance resulting from the unmet expectations of the tourist, whose image of Varanasi was based on exotic representations and tourist tales. It may well be that those who told the Canadian about Varanasi (at home and on the road) were equally disillusioned by the constant pestering of the boatmen. Nevertheless, as Urry (1990: 86) points out: 'even when the object fails to live up to its representation it is the latter which will stay in people's minds, as what they have really "seen"'. However, the Orientalist imagery that is characteristic of such places is a mixed bag. On the one hand, tourists seek an authentic and spiritual experience of India, one that is often portrayed by a series of romantic imagery (photographs, literature, tourist brochures). On the other hand, the untamed imagery of India as a place where one must bargain is also common knowledge. In fact, the culture of bargaining, in part, contributes to the construction of India and its inhabitants as different.

The image of the boatmen as aggressive bargainers corresponds to a wider imagery that figures in depictions of the Orient as mischievous and conniving. The act of bargaining is seen as unpleasant and dishonest conduct by many Westerners, who associate such behaviour with poverty, greediness and expediency (Geertz 1979; Herrmann 2003: 242). Such ideas may tell us as much about ourselves as about the exotic 'other'. As Herrmann (2003: 246) observes:

‘Americans equate fixed prices with equality, fairness, and rationality, and bargaining with inequality, unfairness and irrationality’. In the context of India, such behaviour becomes even more dissonant as many foreigners continue to associate India with a notion of spirituality and purity. A similar example is given in the following passage in which Noa, an Israeli girl, relates her experience of Varanasi:

You have to argue and bargain for everything! It spoils the atmosphere of holiness. At the same time, I can understand them, they are poor people and I am not angry with them. We need to have compassion, but really what did I ask for except to pay the real price.

Noa’s experience in the contact zone is not unique. These ideas about ‘India’ continue to inform tourist sensibilities, expectations and responses. In this case, the Israeli tourist finds it hard to come to terms with people trying to exact more money than she would like to pay because she is a tourist. Thus, she is disappointed that her ‘hosts’ exhibit such materialistic tendencies.⁹ Moreover, she is upset at being treated like an ignorant tourist unaware of local prices.

Such an experience of disillusionment results from certain fantasies about India and the city of Varanasi as a spiritual place, poverty as a sign of virtue (rather than greed); and its inhabitants as quaint, generous and forthcoming. Moreover, in spite of the unpleasant and disliked practice of bargaining, many tourists speak of this as part of the ‘real’, difficult and ‘authentic’ experience of India - in a manner akin to a ‘rite of passage’. As Noa, continued to explain: ‘When I arrived in India, other travelers said that one should only go to Varanasi after having travelled in India for sometime since Varanasi is the real India and there are no concessions!’. Thus, the ‘encounter’ in the contact zone is pregnant with contradictions, at once destabilising and confirming one’s pre-conceived perceptions of India (Hutnyck 1996: 58). In a way, Noa’s frustrations were eased by the fact that her experience confirmed the representation of Varanasi as a difficult and challenging place.

Paying local prices should be situated within the broader context of tourist discourse and patterns of consumption. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, consumption is a form of communication as well

⁹ Trojanow’s (2001) recent critique of travelogues of India written by such prominent European intellectuals as Günter Grass is instructive:

Evidently, an author who is sick of consumer society has composed a fantasy of indulgence. But this fantasy is light-years away from the aspirations of the slum-dweller, who is saving up for a TV, on which he can admire the local and foreign consumer and the consumer goods for which he is striving.

as a means of social differentiation. In our case, consuming the local in its many forms serves to enhance cultural capital, a matter of great significance when one is traveling and relating to fellow travelers. Sørensen (2003: 856) calls this ‘road status’, which ‘is obtained in many ways: paying “local prices”, getting the best deal, traveling off the beaten track, long-term travel, disease, dangerous experiences, and more’. As such, consuming the local also serves to demarcate and differentiate the ‘traveler’ from the ‘tourist’ (package tours), whom they mock by saying that they (the package tourist) see India through the window of a bus.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that for travelers their gaze is not restricted to the visual (as opposed to organised tours). Travelers actively seek a range of physical (fatigue, illness, danger, sex) and emotional (elation, satisfaction) experiences of the local, as part of their wider consumption of local culture. The insistence on paying ‘local prices’ is related to how tourists perceive themselves in relation to the ‘other’. The fact that, as travelers, they are in many respects similar to other passing tourists from affluent Western countries who have the privilege to travel, seems to evade many of them. Ironically, for many backpackers one way of avoiding such feelings of unease is to insist on consuming and participating in the local since, among other things, it contributes to the illusion of being in control. In other words, the feeling of unease at being tricked and manipulated by locals reflects not only the way in which myth and reality collide in the contact zone, but also that the so called ‘hosts’ are never just passive recipients of the dominant tourist discourse. In the following section I will examine the ways in which boatmen have been able to gain a degree of control over tourist-host transactions at the local level. The strategies employed by boatmen in their encounters with tourists are informed by their passenger distribution system, as well as their ability to operate as cultural brokers, mediating and negotiating the city for the tourists.

Tourist-boatmen transactions

Although it is clear that certain power structures conditioning global tourism in the Third World are beyond the control of local actors, such as boatmen, this does not entail the passivity or powerlessness of locals in the contact zone. In this context it is useful to recall Foucault’s notion of power and what he calls the ‘micro-physics of power’ (Foucault 1991: 26-27). Power, according to Foucault, circulates everywhere in society. It is therefore misleading to identify power with any particular or fixed individual, group or institution. Moreover, by examining the power-knowledge nexus, Foucault illustrates that power does not necessarily entail the use of

¹⁰ Obviously, ‘local’ items for consumption are in many cases produced specifically for travelers. Rarely do locals eat or wear such items as the bags and clothes for sale in markets.

force; rather it is often expressed and exerted through manipulation, induction, deception and solicitation (Hall 1997: 261). In our context, I argue that the boatmen are not simply passive recipients of the hegemonic neo-colonial tourist discourse, but have developed various strategies on a local level to accommodate, adapt to and exploit tourists' needs, wants and fears.

The *boli* system: classifying and objectifying visitors

The ghats and riverfront are the primary setting for the boatman – tourist encounter. In order to regulate passenger (tourist/pilgrim/local) distribution across the riverfront the boatman community operates a unique work system. This system is based on a territorial arrangement of the riverfront, which is divided according to the different ghats. Each distinct ghat space is considered the exclusive territory of a specific group of resident boatmen (*ghatwars*). In turn, a boatman is always associated with a specific ghat, which serves as his base and place of work on the riverscape. As such, there are no 'loose' boatmen operating in Varanasi.

The territorial organization across the riverfront is relatively fixed. There are roughly eighty ghats, most of which have boundaries marking the territorial jurisdiction of the resident boatmen. On the majority of ghat these boundaries do not correspond to the borders described by the official ghat names and are therefore invisible to the eye of a layman. All boatmen in Varanasi, however, are aware of each ghat's borders and there is a common understanding or verbal contract enforced by customary practice that prevents boatmen from transgressing ghat boundaries for the purpose of taking passengers. Nonetheless, there have been disputes over territorial jurisdiction between *ghatwars* and, in some cases, ghat borders have shifted over the years. This is especially evident on the more financially lucrative ghats, such as Dashashwamedh ghat and Raj ghat.

As mentioned previously, the initial moment of encounter between boatman and visitor (potential passenger) occurs on the ghat or, more broadly, in the proximity of the ghat space. This space includes the ghats, the river, the boat and the other side of the river, as well as the neighbourhoods adjacent to the river. On most ghats boatmen are strategically placed to gauge the tourist's moves and intentions as s/he enters the ghat space. As a tourist arrives, for example on Assi ghat, s/he is immediately spotted, pegged and subsequently assigned to a particular boatman. That boatman then approaches the tourist to ask if s/he would like to take a boat ride. In other words, from the moment of entry onto the ghat the boatmen closely observe a visitor's activities and intentions. This surveillance of the unsuspecting tourist is part of a broader method of passenger distribution practiced among the boatmen on many ghats along the riverfront.

The *ghatwars* of Assi ghat usually sit/stand on a cliff with a birds eye view over the territory of the ghat and from there they are able to spot and bid for potential passengers (tourist/pilgrim/local). This act of identifying and bidding for passengers is known as *boli*.¹¹ The method of distributing passengers is based on spatial classifications within the ghat territory itself. The first stage concerns bidding for a potential passenger. As a potential passenger enters the ghat, the *ghatwars* ‘call out’ the place from which s/he emerges. For example, ‘passenger coming from temple’ or ‘passenger coming from the pandit’s house’; or ‘passenger from the riverfront’. This call is made by the boatmen between themselves, in terms unfamiliar to other Indians and without the knowledge of the potential passenger entering their territorial jurisdiction. The boatmen who bid must be located on the aforementioned cliff to participate in this auction like activity.¹² The boatman who first identifies and calls for the potential passenger then has the right to approach him/her or send his worker to do so.

As can be seen in the above examples, when competing for passengers, the boatmen use spatial terms to designate their clients. These spatial terms represent the physical environment as perceived by the boatmen, and serve to divide the ghat space into many sub-sections. These terms set the ground rules for participation and inclusion; they are part of a common pool of signs and shared conceptual maps based on agreed vocabulary and knowledge that are essential for those working on the ghat as boatmen. A boatman who is not from Assi ghat is not likely to understand the full meaning of these spatial terms, primarily because he is not familiar with the particular ghat space. Others would be perplexed by the terms used by boatmen simply because they speak quickly, in local dialect and in a short semi-coded manner. In other words, on the ghat it is the boatmen who control and manipulate the encounter with the tourists from the outset. Moreover, the method of passenger distribution exhibits, in Foucault’s terms, ‘panoptic qualities’ that enable classification of space and objectification of potential passengers..

¹¹ The dictionary definition of the term *boli* clearly illustrates its multiple meanings. According to the *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (McGregor 1993: 751) the word *boli* means: 1. speech, manner of speech...idiom; 2. talk.3. bid (at auction). All of these meanings are relevant in relation to *boli* and passenger distribution among the boatmen.

¹² Interestingly, on the main ghat of Varanasi (Dashashwamedh) other features are added to describe the potential passenger, for example ‘the one with the red hat, black pants arriving from the temple’. This is due to the large flow of people arriving to the major ghat of the city, which necessitates additional forms of identification.

Under the surveying method of passenger distribution (*boli*) the tourist is an object of observation and judgment, as I shall expand on shortly. The tourist is gazed upon, as it were, thereafter becoming the ‘property’ of a particular boatman. The initial encounter with the boatmen is controlled from the outset. Thus, price negotiation is restricted to certain limitations. On numerous occasions I observed tourists who were displeased with the price offered by the boatman, thereafter rejecting him and ceremoniously walking off in search of a lower price. The tourists, however, were unaware that the next boatman who approached them was in fact from the same family as the previous one. The price subsequently offered is usually slightly lower to appease the tourists, permitting the tourists to come away thinking that they had control in the transaction.

The foreign tourist visiting India often expects to enact the ritual practice of bargaining. This expectation is met and the negotiation of price is performed on the ghat as part of the tourist-boatman encounter. However, what the tourist is unaware of is that this ritual interaction is institutionalised as part of a larger system of social interaction pertaining to the boatman community. Moreover, a similar system applies to all other potential passengers (locals and domestic tourists), though the interaction will differ according to the passenger ‘type’. As we shall see below, determining passenger ‘type’ is imperative to the boatmen’s livelihood.

According to the method of passenger distribution, once pegged the potential passenger is approached by the successful boatman. Prior to the actual spoken encounter, however, the boatman seeks to ‘define the situation’ (Goffman 1974: 13). He calculates a set of factors: an assessment of the potential passenger according to age, gender, clothing, nationality and conduct. This is similar to the way in which boatmen and priests communicate in coded terms to gauge and assess a pilgrim’s socio-economic status. Many boatmen are keen observers when it comes to guessing a tourist’s nationality from afar. Identifying a passenger’s characteristics is useful for the interactions that follow. If the potential passenger is interested in taking a boat ride the boatmen will subsequently start the price negotiation according to nationality. For example, for an Israeli passenger, the boatmen will start the price negotiation at a much higher sum. They know, as they told me many, times that Israelis are hard bargainers and argumentative (they also noted that Israeli women are just as tough). Comments they made about nationalities include: Koreans being stingy and rude and Americans and British being nice and polite.

The construction of such nationalist stereotypes based on a limited interaction serves to illustrate how the boatmen themselves objectify and perceive the ‘other’. Such perceptions are often

subject to conversation among the boatmen and the manner in which many backpackers dress and interact with each other, as well as with locals is often mocked by them. For example, in my conversations with them, some boatmen found the matted hair sported by 'hippie' tourists and their clothing as both perplexing and ridiculous. In addition, they mentioned the unkempt, ragged and immodest look of the travelers.

Another area for judgment by boatmen concerns gender. Generally, within the local framework of gender relations women occupy the domestic sphere. A family's status may be tarnished if the womenfolk work outside the home. Therefore, some Indian men view foreign women from the outset as somewhat 'loose' and their behavior unrespectable.¹³ This is further compounded by the varying ideas of what constitutes proper and improper dress across different cultures.

Many foreign women protest at being stared at and harassed by local men. The behaviour of Indian men towards foreign women is often described as sleazy and offensive. In fact, the Lonely Planet India guidebooks provide a whole section concerning women travelers in India (see, Bhattacharyya 1997). Foreign women constantly feel the indigenous male gaze upon them. One German woman tourist told me of the frustration she felt at having to keep her guard up, despite her efforts to follow local conduct and dress codes. However, the majority of foreign tourists are utterly oblivious to local conventions. Some women wear skimpy worn out clothing, have their hair loose and smoke in public, all of which are considered unfitting behaviour in traditional and sacred places, such as Varanasi. Indeed, such conduct may further indicate the 'neo-imperialist' nature of tourism in Third World countries. Tourist insensitivities or indifference to local sensibilities may possibly derive from the playful and pleasure seeking conduct that characterizes much of tourism. Similarly, for some women tourists the carefree, liminal phase of travel also opens up a variety of other possibilities, including sexual relationships with boatmen.¹⁴

¹³ There are many reasons as to why local men perceive foreign women (especially Western) as highly promiscuous and often morally corrupt. This stereotype possibly derives from the many movie advertisements spread across the city on billboards in which blond, voluptuous Western women are shown seeking sexual pleasure. It is also no secret that pornographic movies starring Western women circulate freely in India.

¹⁴ Tucker (1997: 113-114) makes this argument suggesting that for the female tourist in Turkey 'the liminal experiences of tourism allow[s] for certain moral constraint present in moral life to be put aside'. At the same time such relationships contribute to the strengthening of 'local male sexual identity'.

However, a gazing and ‘playful’ spirit is clearly not the sole privilege of the tourist. The ‘hosts’ not only bluntly gaze at foreign tourists, but also make jokes about their looks and conduct among themselves and, at times, directly in front of them. Some boatmen even classify foreign women (in national terms) according to their sexual prowess. This may indeed be a case of male boasting mixed with feelings of frustration. However, such experiences also enable the boatmen to reflect on their own culture and gender relations. When I asked one boatman whether he would like to marry a foreign woman, he adamantly answered: ‘No, I will only marry an Indian woman. Indian women don’t go around with other men; an Indian wife will remain loyal to her husband and will provide him company until the end. Now, I am just playing with foreign women’.

I suspect, however, that despite such claims boatmen often feel restricted by their culture and ambivalent towards foreign influences, especially regarding gender relations. The uneven power relations are obvious: the boatmen remain in Varanasi while the foreign women come and go as they please. The women are mobile, wealthy and at least seem to be in control of their own lives. Boatmen feel excluded and restricted in their movements. Not only are they not able to visit foreign countries, but in their own environment they are barred from escorting tourists outside the riverscape and old city. In doing so they risk prosecution for illegally operating as tour guides.

As mentioned earlier, many tourists’ initial encounters with boatmen are unfavourable, largely the result of the constant hassling they experienced along the riverfront. Knowing this, some boatmen will try to neutralise the often unpleasant feeling surrounding the initial encounter once a tourist has been pegged and solicited to take a boat. On many occasions I witnessed boatmen neutralising the unpleasant aspect of bargaining by telling the tourist ‘pay as much as you wish at the end of the boat ride’. Another technique employed by boatmen involves negotiating a lower price. Once in the boat, however, the boatmen will employ all their persuasive and manipulative techniques to compel the passenger to pay a larger sum. Similarly, on the boat, boatmen will engage with the passenger to get an impression of his/her wants and needs, as well as the length of their stay in the city. Having gained knowledge about a tourist’s intentions, boatmen may offer to negotiate Hindi, Yoga, or music lessons for the tourist, as well as a range of other services. Moreover, boatmen will often make an extra effort to establish rapport with tourists who intend to stay for a period of time (ie. more than 3 days). This is because once a boatman establishes rapport with a tourist, the next time s/he enters the ghat space, s/he is no longer part of the *boli*

pegging system. The tourist then falls into the ‘known passenger’ category and is automatically designated to that boatman.¹⁵

The encounter in the boat is a significant one for the boatmen, as it provides room for manoeuvre outside the pressures of the initial encounter. On the boat a boatman provides the passenger with a range of services, including the provision of cultural products, which contribute to and hopefully enhance the experience of boating. These services demonstrate to the tourist the abilities of the boatman as a guide. He provides information, interpretations and clarification for the tourist concerning the river, Varanasi and Hindu culture in general, and more importantly, information and insight into local aspects of the city, which formal tour guides are often unfamiliar with.¹⁶ The following conversation I had with a French couple illustrates how the boatman-tourist relationship typically develops:

Q: How did you decided to take a boat boat?

A: A boatman came and asked whether we wanted to take a boat ride and we agreed. It was very interesting. At first he took us along the riverfront explaining about the burning ghats and the reasons why some corpses are cremated and others are not, like babies and holy men. He also took us to the Nepali temple and showed us around the streets. Later the boatman suggested we see the evening ceremony on the main ghat; so we arranged to meet him in the evening. He waited for us next to the hotel. He is an older boatman, a very kind person. The following day the same boatman arranged to meet us and take us to the Ramnagar fort across the river. He showed us around and took us to the museum, later he took us to have a very tasty *lassi* drink near the fort.

A British tourist recounted a similar experience:

...from the boat the boatman showed us the cremation ghats and explained about karma in Hinduism, the cost of wood for cremations, and the quantity of wood needed. It was a good experience. I feel I understand more about Indian culture now.

Q: Can I ask how much he charged?

A: He charged 70 Rs per hour, but I paid more because he worked like a guide.

These conversations clearly illustrate that the services provided by the boatmen far exceed the physical labour of rowing. Boatmen are also aware of the tourists’ search for ‘authenticity’, such as going to places uncontaminated by other tourists. They often offer tourists a visit to their homes to meet their families, thus providing the tourist with a ‘backstage’ glimpse into Indian culture – the ‘real India’. In addition, by telling the tourists their own personal stories, the boatmen (whether consciously or not) destabilise the generic representation of indigenous people as passive objects, which are commonly found in guidebooks (see, Bhattacharyya 1997: 388). In

¹⁵ Following Geertz (1979), Herrmann (2003: 241) suggests that a ‘softer style’ of bargaining maybe ‘used to establish long-term trading relationships or “clientization”’.

¹⁶ A vivid example of the various levels of guidance in Varanasi is given in the documentary film *Boatman* (Rossi 1993). Here the boatman acts as a local guide, reflecting on both the ‘strange’ tourists as well as Hindu culture.

fact, many boatmen showed me photos and letters they had received from tourists with whom they had established good relationships. Such personalised relationships seem to add to the quality of the tourist experience and cultural capital ('road status').

As we have seen, backpackers place importance on consuming the local and search for an authentic (and at times spiritual) experience, which serves to enhance their cultural capital. This accumulation of cultural capital is indeed reminiscent of the colonial period where resources and capital produced in the peripheries were taken back to the centers of power. However, it should not be forgotten that, just as the whole process of production in Third World countries involved remittance and profit, it also generated capital in the colonial outposts in terms of employment opportunities, education and social mobility. Thus, boatmen are aware of the tourist discourse and the significance of enhancing the tourist experience through such acts as taking them to unique places and family visits. This is one example of how the cultural capital accumulated by tourists and produced as part of the tourist discourse is available to, generated and exploited by and for locals, such as the boatmen.

Many boatmen are becoming increasingly aware of how the tourist discourse operates, especially through travel talk and electronic communication. Nowadays some boatmen have acquired business cards, mobile phones and e-mail accounts with the assistance of tourists.¹⁷ When backpackers arrive to the city equipped with a visiting card, they directly head to the riverfront to avoid the many hassles associated with arriving to Varanasi, such as being led to an unwanted guest house by a rickshaw driver. Moreover, a tourist who has heard of a boatman's credentials from fellow travelers is less suspicious of him and the initial encounter is more pleasant. For the boatman, such encounters mean he gains a 'known passenger' with the initial interaction with the tourists more amicable for him also and rapport more easily attained. Furthermore, establishing trust and cultivating a personal relationship with tourists often yields unpredicted benefits.

One such case is a close long standing friendship between a young boatman from the main ghat area and a Dutch woman, called Ineka. The Dutch woman, who is in her 40's had come to Varanasi for the first time five years previous. She narrated her initial encounter with the boatman, called Sundar, to me:

¹⁷ One card has a picture of the main temple on Prayag ghat and on the side is written the name of the boatman and his place of residence: 'Anil Manjhi, Prayag ghat, Dashashwamedh, Varanasi, Requested; everybody for "BOATING" Please contact here'.

My first encounter with Sundar was at the road crossing near the main ghats. I was looking in the Lonely Planet guide to find out how to get to the golden temple when a young man approached me asking if I needed help. Well you know, by that time I was already two months in India and was familiar with such hassling, so I said ‘no, just go, go away (*‘chello chello’*). He answered, madam I don’t want money, just to help you’. I knew their tricks and said go away, I am a big girl. So then he looked at me, and caught me with a sentence that I think must work well with many tourists. He said ‘Madam, I like your face, I want to help you, why do you tourists always think we want to cheat you?’ So I thought ‘wow’, maybe some people are really kind and not just after my money. I looked at his face and I saw a young man and said alright, I want to go to see the Golden Temple. He took me there and to other places and finally I said, well now I want to pay you for your services. I was so surprised when he refused any payment, so then I invited him for a drink. I asked what his job was and he replied: ‘I am boatman and tourist guide’. So I said ok, then maybe tomorrow you can show me Varanasi and then I can pay you. We arranged to meet the following day and he took me on a really nice tour with his boat to see the ghats and temples.

Ineka and Sundar have maintained a close relationship since then Ineka has helped Sundar in many ways, teaching him to read and write in English, and assisting him with financial difficulties. Over the years, Ineka has sent Sundar enough money to purchase a small house. She and her family come to Varanasi once every two years and Sundar has come to be considered as one of her ‘sons’. They have traveled around India together and took Sundar on his first flight. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Sundar’s encounter with Ineka was designed purely to receive financial benefits. It is important to note that there is no way for either boatmen or tourists to entirely predict the outcome of their relationships. In other words, there is a potentiality in the relationship that cannot be anticipated in advance and should not be reduced to economic terms. An ethnographic examination of the contact zone enables us to see how boatmen ‘move’ and influence tourist’s lives and vice versa. Such close relationships between boatmen and tourists are not rare or novel.¹⁸

Conclusion

In this article I examined the way in which boatmen interact with visitors to Varanasi. To demonstrate the creative ways in which boatmen engage with pilgrims, domestic and foreign tourists, I focused on the contact zone. A close examination of how boatmen operate and mediate the city for the multitudes of pilgrims who visit it clearly revealed the multidimensional nature of

¹⁸ In his memoirs the well known scholar Alain Danielou describes his time in Banaras (early 20th century) where he mentions his close relationship with a boatman (See Danielou 1987: 130-132). This relationship, I have come to know, was maintained over several decades through correspondence and financial assistance given to the boatman.

their work. The boatmen's services are never simply functional; their services also involve ensuring the security and safety of pilgrims, as well as operating as cultural brokers by negotiating the city of Varanasi in a similar fashion to that of a tour guide. As such boatmen are able to exercise some authority over the pilgrims, benefiting accordingly. As we have seen, the unique working system of the boatmen, along with their local knowledge and experience are clearly useful for interacting with and influencing both domestic and foreign tourists.

Undoubtedly much of the tourist discourse emanating from the West is beyond the control of local actors. However, as I have argued throughout this paper, such hierarchical power relations do not entail the passivity and subordination of locals. As the case study demonstrates, it is in the contact zone where we can gauge the innovative strategies employed by boatmen to deal with tourists, their needs, wants and fears. Here, the boatmen cleverly exercise control and agency over 'guest-host' interactions and transactions. The method of passenger distribution, which serves to regulate passenger flow and mitigate conflict among boatmen themselves, is based on monitoring and bidding for potential passengers entering the ghat space, and assessing them according to socio-economic status and nationality. Thus, it is the tourist who is under the boatmen's gaze and subjected to typological examination (and at times ridicule), allowing the boatmen to critically reflect on foreign culture, as well as their own.

Similarly, the way in which some boatmen engage with tourists demonstrates a good understanding of the tourist discourse: the search for an authentic and local experience. As in the case of pilgrims, boatmen operate as cultural brokers negotiating the city of Varanasi for the visitors. Their multiple roles as informal tour guides, commission-paid agents, locals and friends means they are able to influence, manipulate and enhance the visitor's experience of the city. Finally, although some boatmen clearly gain from their interactions with tourists in terms of economic and cultural capital, it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that, in some cases, genuine and long lasting relationships are forged and are of great significance for both the boatmen and tourists.

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