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Research article

Subjectivity, identity, and self-transformation

An anthropological approach to travel encounters in India

Cecilia Bastos

This article focuses on the potential of travelling which spiritual pilgrims to India experience as opportunity for self-transformation. In this process, travelling offers contact with "otherness" and a sense of critical distance from everyday values and ideas. The article explores symbolic meanings of travel as a secular ritual involving ruptures with the ordinary. Seeing them as a driving force behind the creation of relationships between different traditions, this article looks at encounters from an anthropological perspective. Based on my empirical research on the intentions of foreign travellers in India and by studying their motivations and searches, I argue that such travels can be understood as a means for travellers not only to find others but also to encounter themselves.

Keywords: alterity; subjectivity; anthropology; India; travel encounters

Den här artikeln fokuserar på den potential resande har att fungera som en möjlighet för upplevd själv-transformation, via kontakt med "annorlundahet" och genom att skapa en kritisk distans från vardagsvärderingar och -idéer. Den undersöker symboliska betydelser som resor kan få i egenskap av ett slags sekulära ritualer som innebär brott med "det vanliga". Med utgångspunkten att möten (*encounters*) utgör en drivkraft för relationsskapande mellan olika traditioner undersöker artikeln sådana möten utifrån ett antropologiskt perspektiv. Genom en empirisk studie av utländska resenärer i Indien och deras motiveringar och sökanden, menar jag att deras resor kan förstås som ett medel för dem att inte bara möta andra människor utan också för att möta sig själva.

Nyckelord: alteritet; subjektivitet; antropologi; Indien; rese-möten

This article is the result of an anthropological research project on the spiritual quests of travellers in India, focusing on the meanings that these travels assume by trying to understand why certain tourists seek spiritual experiences in their travels and how these feature in stories of personal transformation. This interest was initially motivated by a trip to India as a tourist in 1996, and later developed through two return journeys as a researcher, first in 2005 and again in 2008. Intrigued to find out more about them, I started my master's and doctoral research seeking to better understand this category of travellers. During these travels, I met a specific type of tourist or spiritual traveller that seemed omnipresent in India, and yet was very different from the types of tourists I was used to seeing in other places. Of those I spoke with, some had been in India for anywhere between six months and two years. Individuals lived in different kinds of accommodation, including Buddhist monasteries, yoga ashrams, or meditation retreats.

Against this background, the article's main aim is to explore the potential for self-transformation in a specific form of travel, as narrated by the travellers themselves. Aided in my analysis by theories of religious tourism, the article shows how "spiritual" travels change the perception of oneself and others. Doing so, I seek to contribute to an empirically grounded discussion about the potential of travelling as an opportunity for self-transformation, as well as more overarching philosophical and theoretical discussions about the nature of subjectivity, identity change, and self-awareness.

Materials and methods

The first time I did fieldwork in India, it was as part of my master's degree, interviewing a total of eight tourists. The second time I did fieldwork in India, for my PhD thesis, a further ten tourists were interviewed, the ones that were selected for analysis in this particular article: Laura, a young American who was in India

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for two months "to work on" her meditation; Peter, a middle-aged Belgian who studied Vipassana meditation for many years and was almost a teacher himself; Olive, an English woman who was in India for the third time, this time she was studying with a different guru; Jade, a young Canadian who was at an ashram in Rishikesh for four months with her traveling companion Judith, a middle-aged Canadian; Tomas, a young Russian who had been living in an ashram for about five months and was interested in puja rituals and its symbolism; Jessica and Natasha, two Brazilians, one young and the other middle-aged, who were doing a yoga retreat course in Pushkar; and an Italian young couple, Paolo and Gabrielle, who were studying the teachings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (also known as Osho). I have selected them because they said they were searching for spirituality and seemed representative of the many other travellers I met. Also, these people's stories have particular relevance to the questions I explore here.

This article is based on my travel experiences and fieldwork in India and on the participant observation of those I encountered there. Although I carried out fieldwork in different cities and with people from varied nationalities and cultural backgrounds, there was a commonality among interlocutors in that their travels were motivated by a spiritual dimension and often by expectations and cultural ideas related to the notion of travel. This type of traveller can also be seen as one who is looking for spiritual experiences, without being linked to a specific religious institution, since supposedly such spirituality can be thought of, in individual terms, as a process of self-transformation. Some look for a spiritual aspect deemed appropriate to their lives, therefore their perceptions of religion are elaborated through a process of seeking in which various traditions are evaluated according to one's own worldview and values. Along with the relationships I developed with informants while carrying out research, interviews provided me with enough material to think about both the case of tourism and spirituality in the contemporary world. While still in the field, I realised that India became a fertile ground for the observation of personal religiosity as a project of (re)construction, whereby ruptures in subjectivity facilitated self-transformation.

The most striking feature of my interlocutors was that they seemed willing to consume the established religions that India is known for, often making a kind of bricolage from various religions and sects, assimilating different aspects of each to build their own way to practise them. Going further, I understand that they mix not only religions, but also cultural traditions such as yoga, massage, and alternative medicine. Therefore, I argue that a consequence of encounters such as these is a bricolage of Indian culture itself. I use the phenomenon of pilgrimages as a framework for my analysis as the notion of self-transformation it involves is a recurrent theme in both religious and cultural bricolage practices.

Previous research on travel and spirituality

The idea of modern pilgrimage was helpful for understanding my informants because it addresses the rupture with everyday life that many described, and because pilgrimage involves placing oneself in a critical way, whereby material detachment is a condition for experiencing liminality.[1] This experience, considered transformative, leads them to make an "inner" journey. Their motivation is often related to the possibility of "encountering oneself", with intentions to achieve self-improvement and possible transformation.[2] This change can be understood as a reflexive process, through which travellers seek a rupture with their quotidian existence with the intention to re-signify their identity. It is in the sense of breaking with everyday life in search of "another time and space" that they seek to transcend the "ordinary" or "mundane". While they believe they are looking for something external, they are often aware that their more important "journey" takes place individually and "internally".[3] Therefore, the encounter with another way of living not only offers the individual a wealth of knowledge about a certain tradition, but also provides a window into their certainties, for when comparing themselves with the other, they become aware of their peculiarity.

Religious tourism can be seen as a displacement that comes about through the search for religious experiences outside of the context of familiar rules, obligations, beliefs or norms. As a form of ritual, travelling itself can be considered sacred (see Graburn 2001). Consequently, I understand that travelling in India can be thought of as an experience of inversion of values, an immersion in a world which presents different symbols and codes of behaviour, generating at times a profound estrangement.

Travelling can be considered a ritual being situated "outside the limits of this world" (Graburn 2001; Dann 1999). There is a consensus among tourism researchers that pilgrimage constitutes an extraordinary time (MacCannell 1989; Urry 1990; Steil 2002), in which the stress, fatigue and even the perceived falsity of everyday life can be left behind in search of more authentic, true, and creative environments. For some, it is a unique experience that leads pilgrims to find answers to fundamental questions about the meaning of life, which would be hard to obtain in another way – such as the

[1] Victor Turner (1997) defines liminality as a moment of suspension of rules, hierarchy and structure, relating its experience to a critic of modern life and daily life sociability: the main feature of liminality is the opportunity to have an extraordinary experience, through which pilgrims would put their way of perceiving the world and people on hold.
[2] I argue here that the encounter with oneself speaks to exploring a self that is not the same as the self that one is already aware of.
[3] Here we can draw a relation of self-transformation with the encounter in a manner we may term existential: its sense does not refer to "any particular acquaintanceship, but to an experience that shakes a person to the core. In this sense, encounter is always an existential experience" (Koskela & Siljander 2014: 72–73).

search for questioning established forms of knowledge or for new alternatives of thought. I find the view of certain social scientists quite significant for the theme of contemporary tourism. For instance, MacCannell, comparing tourism to religion, argues that tourist attractions are precisely "analogous to the religious symbolism" of the pre-modern era (1989: 2). In this sense, it is necessary to explore its meaning "on the symbolic level", understanding tourism as a secular ritual that in many contemporary societies would fulfil functions once found in sacred rituals (Lett 1989: 276).[4]

When debating spiritual encounters in the context of travel, Steil indicates the application of the framework of studies of religion and rituals to interpret contemporary tourism and argues that this aspect of tourism was even suggested by Durkheim, who saw in the great processions of modern tourism a ritual, celebrated on fixed dates and fulfilling the objective of intensifying the social bond in contemporary societies (2002: 58). MacCannell also suggests that, according to Durkheim, tourism would absorb some of the functions of religion in today's world (1973: 13). Some authors say that tourism appears as a "modern substitute for traditional religion", as it would have a meaning far beyond a simple "activity", and more properly understood as a form of "orientation towards the modern world" (Steil 2002: 58–9). As in the field of religion, sacred objects and places are venerated and become part of tourist rites. I thus share Steil's (2002) argument that there are common elements in the fields of tourism and religion, produced by the same social mechanisms of election and division of the world into sacred and profane. Travelling itself can be elected as an object of veneration.

Theorising the encounter in the context of spiritual tourism to India

I have observed and spoken with people who described their travels in terms of valuing spiritual over material experiences, travelling to India with the aim of finding sages and gurus who could teach them ways to achieve enlightenment, liberation or nirvana. In other countries, I came across travellers who emphasised looking for difference, seeing the "exotic" and having an experience of meeting the "natives", some even report having had profound experiences in their relationship with the "other" which, in itself, already disagrees with the motivations highlighted and studied by different scientists who have taken tourism as an object of study (cf. Cohen 1979; Dann 1999; Graburn 2001; MacCannell 1989; Urry 1990). However, their experiences seem to be quite different from those I am trying to analyse, who often spend months or years in India in order to get to know themselves in a deeper sense[5]. My interlocutors sought out the country with a motivation that went beyond simple exoticism or difference, and which is more related to the fact that India offers a broad range of religions and a diversity of possibilities for spiritual development. Many of these travellers claim to have been "called" there, and I had not heard other places spoken of in similar terms.The interviewees claim to go through a process of transformation during their travels and make a lot of reflections about it. I have observed that the meaning they attribute to this transformation is closely related to reflexivity, connected to the fact that they seem to be critical of "Western" society and its values to begin with and, from that, seek the country to find other "ways of thinking" and other "worldviews", as they explain it. In general, tourists (mainly "westerners"[6]) experience a process of cultural shock and estrangement in the first few days. This process is explained by John Hutnyk as: "the culture you have left against a new, fascinating and confusing culture and it is precisely through this opposition that tourists are forced to renegotiate their differences" (1996: 132). When coming into contact with another culture, travellers are led to review their concepts in light of new paradigms. Unfamiliarity is inherent in the nature of travelling (Hutnyk 1996).

In line with this perspective, I understand travel encounters as experiences which displace travellers from their natural course of life, occurring without the possibility for them "to consciously affect the encounter", being displaced from "normal, safe, habitable behaviour raises existential demands" (Koskela & Siljander 2014: 72), for in the encounter one must re-evaluate one's perceptions and general conceptualisations of life. This secularised version of encounters does not refer to the relationship between human and God or a deity but instead to the relationship of a person to what we could call "otherness", to anything "distinguishable" from the traveller (Koskela & Siljander 2014: 72).

Entering the field: displacement and elective centre

During my fieldwork in India, I realised that a central theme was that of displacement. The travellers who caught my attention elected a centre of reference outside their traditions of origin, at least temporarily,

[4] Tourism would, in this way, take the form of "a modern version of the universal human concern for the sacred", as it results from a "binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary", due to a break with "normal" life and its routine (Urry 1990).

[5] Here, I try to describe how subjectivity can change through this sort of encounter. Hence, the potential of the encounter is woven into the search for spiritual knowledge: one can only truly get to know oneself through detachment of the known and needs to delve into the "unknown" in travel.

[6] Hall (1990) explains that the "West" is a historical and not geographical concept, so he takes as "western" the type of society which is developed, industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular, and modern. Such societies emerged in a particular historical period – approximately during the 16th century and were the result of a set of specific historical, economic, political, social and cultural processes. Currently, any society that shares these characteristics, regardless of its geographical position, can be categorised as belonging to the "West" (Hall 1990).

becoming in effect decentred. They seem to seek other references for the construction of their identity, which is reformulated according to each new situation. Therefore, when moving between symbolic and social borders, the travellers I met were in a constant process of identity construction, mainly due to the fact that they were prone to make a displacement that is not only physical, but social. This displacement is in fact both social and cultural, for it opposes everyday life and structures, a violent rupture with everything that is routine in one's life – toward the unknown, the unforeseen, and the "extraordinary" (Urry 1990; Dann 1999; Graburn 2001), making the traveller perceive space and time differently.

Displacement, for travellers, may therefore involve a sense of closeness to – or internalisation of – the otherness of their host culture, which is mainly triggered when the traveller is critical of his or her own culture and instead embraces the culture of the other as his or her elective centre (Dann 1999). Following Dann (1999), I understand that those who faced this displacement reject the centre of their own society in favour of an elected centre elsewhere. They did it for the simple fact of not knowing how to act and deal with the other culture as soon as they arrived at the place and, therefore, had to act, in a way, like a child (see also Schneider 1968: 9).

A common feature was my interlocutors' emphasis on themes of independence and individual freedom. The critical and independent approach to travelling they chose went beyond independence in terms of non-acceptance of organised forms of travel (with tour packages and guides); it also involved being independent from the opinion and expectations of family members or friends, and the norms of their home societies. Through participant observation, I have noticed that these travellers were part of a community. In that situation, as when they were in another country, even though they were strangers to each other, coming from different countries and regions, they seemed to build or share a common identity: the identity of the traveller, which extended beyond their personal and national identities.[7] That is, as long as they related to others who also travelled independently, they formed a kind of community of their own, while sharing common practices and actions with the aims of self-transformation and spiritual development.

Most of the interviewees[8] also made serious criticisms of "Western" society and its values. Another aspect they pointed out was the unimportance that luxury and privileges have in relation to the reward that the lack of these provides. In general, they were critical of the organisation of tourist activities. In order to have deep and/or spiritual experiences, some interlocutors stressed how they did not mind sleeping in simple inns, eating at street markets, or travelling on public transport. They often described an experience of culture shock in their initial contacts with the population, an estrangement which diminished after some period of getting used to them. After they had understood better how the local culture worked and how to behave in different situations, they felt that they had begun their processes of self-transformation.

The transformation they underwent was based on the way they started to look at themselves, which created a reality that gained meaning for the travellers. This was explained by Jade, a young Canadian who was at an ashram in Rishikesh for four months (with her traveling companion Judith, a middle-aged Canadian):

> So, the experience both highs and lows are from just the energy that India has that allows me to go through things that I probably would never go through, because I'm able to look at myself in a different way here than I can anywhere else. (Jade, Canadian, 27 years old)

The idea of energy transmitted by and in the place was recurrent in their narratives, associated with the notion that this would be a kind of source, in terms of locus, where the person could have experiences that they would never have elsewhere. In this way, the interlocutors understand that these experiences make them able to "see" themselves in a different way in India.

According to Peter, a middle-aged Belgian who studied Vipassana meditation for many years and was almost a teacher himself, his first journey to India was memorable enough to greatly influence his lifestyle. Upon his return, he began to live in seclusion and became a "hermit".

> Then I came back from India, the influence, because I lived four, five years like a *sadhu* in Belgium, like a hermit, there were months I didn't have human contact, nothing. My longest time was two months, without any human contact, without talking, experimenting with fasting, with meditating, starving from cold, from hunger. Nobody, hum? So in the village then you would hear "the hermit, the Indian Baba". I was without any material things; it was like a restored stable. My mother came once a year, she could not accept it, my father, he was "oh my son, what are you doing?" They could not understand why you go suffering so much, why you do this. I knew why, breaking the ego… Yes, India changed me a lot. With coming to India, I discovered who I really am, referring to the Maharishi, the first question: who are you? What is your entity? Where do you come from? What do you do? Where do you go? I discovered this not

[7] I argue that they share an identification through their shared encounter, in that the encounter can also create shared identifications and a sense of *communitas* (Turner 1997).

[8] For more information about the research, the interview situation, the interlocutors, the sorts and forms of contact these were, see Bastos (2022a, 2022b, forthcoming).

> only in India but in the years after, it takes some time. (Peter, Belgian, 47 years old)

Being a recluse from society had a spiritual meaning for him and his life began to be guided by the teachings of Ramana Maharishi, who earned the title of "great sage".[9] Ramana says that only when one discovers who a person truly is can one find their true entity, devoid of the ego. These questions that the interviewee refers to (Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?) that are sometimes considered banal even by researchers should be seen as fundamental and deserve attention, as philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) suggests.

Peter also described his participation in the Vipassana meditation retreat as leading to a feeling of spiritual strengthening:

> So after Vipassana, I had like a kind of rebirth, I felt very good physically, mentally, healthy, very happy, and connected to everybody. A lot of trauma, complexes and frustration came out. I found my true entity. I was connected with everybody and felling spiritually very strong and calm.

The way in which he understands his experience in terms of rebirth suggests a holistic reinterpretation of his trajectory. His journey involved a spiritual experience of personal truth while he was seeking to reach full self-realisation.

Pilgrimage and narratives

It is important to highlight that the notion of a spiritualised India is based on the idea of discourse as a social construction. I realise that much of what travellers say bears a certain resemblance to the messaging of travel advertisements and by travel agencies offering pilgrimages to India, where the attraction being marketed is the possibility to carry out an interior journey of self-discovery through encounters with the various religious cultures of India. In general, India is often presented by media and interlocutors as a place where people can experience an encounter with the sacred, where it is possible to "rediscover" or "connect" with oneself. As highlighted by Castro (1999), the constitution of touristic destinations always implies the construction of narratives and representations oriented in its differentiation in a global context of competition. I understand it is through the selected narratives created about the country that the tourists' gaze is constructed, which does not prevent them from building their own narrative, but their gaze is often mediated by what they have read or heard in advance. I therefore argue that when we talk about tourism, we are always talking about otherness. And in the case studied here, both websites and books give travellers a certain anticipation of the upcoming experience.

Reflecting upon what is disseminated about India, both in tourism media and informant narratives, we can observe that expectations are being created that something significant will happen there. What people read or hear influences subsequent experiences as well as how experiences are reported, making the process cyclical and continuous. According to Chaim Noy (2004), a cyclical quality is achieved in the social context of activities through intensive communication between travellers, playing an equivalent role to commercials and other media disseminated in service of the tourism industry. As Noy indicates, backpackers don't just tell stories, but also hear the experiences of others – before, during and after their journeys. That said, narratives and actual occurrences are intertwined, illustrating the social construction of travel experiences as they are undertaken and recalled (Noy 2004: 92). Therefore, religious language and discourse could offer a kind of interpretation and similar inspiration whose events are imbued with deep meanings.

A recurring theme among the travellers I spoke to was the initial idea of seeking for a "master". However, two interlocutors, one Brazilian and one Canadian, recounted how despite planning to look to someone else to learn from, their journeys of learning came from within:

> I think it's a matter of knowing that my journey is within myself. A fact that is not true when I heard people say: "oh, my master in India", "my master this", "my master that", I was intrigued by this. And when I came here, I was like, "am I going to find a master?" That thing. And then I realised that my master is inside me. That's my quest. And that was the most beautiful experience, that I don't need to look for anyone, that he's in here. In fact, I had to come here to find out about it, to have this breakthrough… (Natasha, Brazilian, 39 years old)

> And I think the first time I came here I thought that my India journey was going to be more external, like, I was looking for a teacher, looking for this and I thought about the sense why I was brought here, and then I realised that the lessons were being learned, but I didn't need that further external teacher, so this time it's just more letting things happen and not constantly looking and thinking I need to find something, it's just kind of easier… The first time I came here, there was something in the back of my mind, like, I read "Autobiography of a yogi" like so many other people and I thought: "oh, there must be yogis like that there and I want to see them, I want to meet them, and I want to have the experience", and I realised the experience was coming from inside,

[9] Ramana, after experiencing what he described as moksha (liberation), left home for Arunachala, a mountain considered sacred by Hindus, where he lived for the rest of his life. His teachings were transmitted to his disciples, most of the time, in absolute silence.

> and… it's just a different feeling now. I didn't know that I was looking for that, but it was definitely in the back of my mind when I was here the last time, thinking like, "ok, this is India and they must be all over the place". And it is all over the place, but just in a different way than I thought originally. (Judith, Canadian, 44 years old)

Because Natasha and Judith both describe an internal process or *inner journey* connected with their travels that I consider them both as pilgrims. Pilgrimage describes an encounter with oneself, and as I understand the experiences each woman described, they involved collisions of different ways of understanding as well as meetings with unfamiliar lifeworlds. Following Koskela and Siljander, it is through this contact with something new that their encounters presented possibilities for "self-examination or reflection and a transformation in one's way of living or being" (2014: 73).

The pilgrims I spoke with seemed to produce a sense of meaning about their own existence through the diversity of situations they experienced (Hervieu-Léger 2003), interpreting the succession of experiences as a meaningful path. As a mobile practice, pilgrimage refers to another form of spatialisation of the religious, through the paths traced and itineraries marked as people move through space (Hervieu-Léger 2003). According to Roof (1994), people are inclined to regard their own experiences as superior to the reports of others and to distinguish truths found through personal discovery as having greater relevance than those distributed through the path of dogma and tradition. This was also true for the travellers I met in the field; for my interlocutors, it seemed that institutionalised religion was empty of meaning, while their experiences seemed to be, in a way, more authentic and empowering by comparison (see also Roof 1994: 67).

The issue of self-improvement, seen as a tool for learning about oneself, arises in the account of Olive – an English woman who was in India for the third time, this time she was studying with a different guru – who says she has grown when having to deal with certain situations:

> That was not one of the best experiences I've had, you grow with it… Having to travel for thirty days in a train in general class which is full, you've got your friends there, and it's terrible, it's awful, it's like such a long journey, and you are in the general classes, and then at some point during that you realise it's actually funny. And you're suffering, you are tired, you're exhausted and everyone is staring at you, but then you have to just start laughing and you realise where you are, and then it's fantastic, you are having an adventure, you know? (Olive, English, 37 years old)

Similar moments of great adventure were interpreted by many of my interlocutors as situations in which an explosion of different sensations was manifested. However, some saw this intensity of emotions as something positive in the Romantic sense of the term – as subjectivity being glorified as the source of perception and individuality, the natural becoming the pure, the feminine emerging as the repository of the most important human values (see also Lutz 1988). Olive describes her travels as times of suffering but, at the same time, she felt that it was the very suffering which was the key to her self-transformation:

> I think the worst experiences I've had in India have been when I travelled alone, feeling intimidated and being touched and being sad, a bit, and actually I think that was also the best experience. Like, on my first trip I did six months travelling alone here, and working through that and becoming strong and independent and then you have to deal with it, with the most empowering feeling ever in the world, like feeling going through these awful experiences and then realising you can go through "shit" like that and become really strong from it and realising it was probably one of the best experiences one can possibly have. (Olive, English, 37 years old)

Having shared with them certain aspects of travelling in India made me wonder how much emotions and the self are built in a specific cultural environment: their discourses gained meaning not from an independent, essential self, but from their own experiences in a world of new meanings, images and social bonds in which they were involved. Tomas, a young Russian who had been living in an ashram for about five months and was interested in puja[10] rituals and their symbolism, has the same notion. According to him:

> Having gone to India gave me the opportunity to do a laboratory with myself; more in relation to knowledge, in the sense of understanding what takes place in the intellect. In India you can see the spots, you get to know yourself; it is self-knowledge in this sense, the psychology of the mind itself. (Tomas, Russian, 32 years old)

In addition to having acquired some knowledge of Vedanta, the greatest knowledge he acquired was about himself, as knowing what aroused his reactions became "very evident" through his experiences in India. What stands out in his account is that it is not a matter of solving problems related to one's sense of self, but becoming aware of them, realising that they exist, and in doing so creating opportunities to understand oneself.

[10] A form of devotional worship of deities particular to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

In the encounter with other peoples and cultures, there can occur experiences that allow travellers to reflect on different values and ideas. In this way, travelling consists of a moment in which it is possible to move across social and cultural boundaries, in order to get to know others. I argue that these displacements bring results, perhaps the most important one being self-transformation through their reflection on otherness, for in the process of travelling, what people discover is their own distinction.

Final remarks

Based on my fieldwork in India, it could be argued that the experience of challenging situations can be understood in terms of liminality, as it led many travellers to reassess and become more aware of their capabilities and uniqueness. Some interlocutors pointed out that the chaos they went through and material obstacles they overcame helped them to grow by offering a sense of "relevance", both in relation to what they had and the purpose of life. For instance, one interviewee felt that he had gained humility, another found she was able to dealing with her own limits. The journeys of the travellers I spoke with can be seen to represent extraordinary periods in their lives, in which the stress, fatigue and perceived falsehood of the everyday world of their home cultures could be left behind in search of what they conceived of as truer and more creative ways of living. For some, a unique experience led them to find answers to fundamental questions about the meaning of life, which they felt could not have otherwise been obtained – such as the search for questioning established forms of knowledge or for new alternatives of thought. Because of this, the experience of being in India could be understood, for my informants, as complex and full of contradictions, encouraging them to think reflexively.

Although they were not necessarily practitioners of a particular religion, some informants had encountered situations that they considered to be spiritual or mystical in nature, leading them to significant transformations in their lives, even if they had not initially sought to do so. Pilgrimage gave them the time and space to understand that "real" discoveries are made within; in fact, some travelled with a clear notion of experimentation or search for alternatives. In this sense, the otherness of Indian culture, by virtue of its perceived authenticity in relation to informants' home cultures, seems to have facilitated explorations of the self at various levels, particularly in terms of worldviews.[11]

It should be noted that pilgrimage is seen as a time where rules, hierarchies and structures are suspended, with the experience of pilgrims connected to criticisms of everyday sociability and modern life. The most important aspect of the pilgrimage observed in my study, however, was the possibility of taking part in an extraordinary experience which would lead pilgrims to suspend their own ways of seeing the world and people. So long as pilgrims were open to embrace the differences they experienced through immersion in Indian religious cultures and intentional communities, their encounters have the potential to create liminal spaces.

Liminality, sometimes perceived by interlocutors as a moment of chaos, was seen among my interviewees as relativising their knowledge, and through this altering their preconceptions. This relativisation, in turn, seemed to cause a paradigm shift for some, as they transformed their way of living, involving a process of shifting the references of the travellers' home culture (which no longer seem to mobilise their "social imaginary") towards the references of this other culture, thus becoming an elective centre (Cohen 1979). Following Cohen, I argue that the elective centre on the one hand expresses alterity and on the other hand expresses central values and interests of the human being that are repressed in everyday life, which means that the "anti-structural other" becomes the sacred centre in a certain profound and unforeseen sense (Cohen 1988). Electing India, then, as a centre meant exchanging references that underlaid worldviews established from another cultural context.

The encounters made possible through travelling can bring with them transformative effects in terms of knowledge production and subjectivity. In bringing about the construction of a new ethos and lifestyle (Schütz 1973: 159; Bastos 2022a), novel encounters in the course of travel can open space for new relationships through which perception is mutually negotiated and new ideas and practices are shaped. When travellers are able to perceive their displacements as social processes, involving more than simply gaining distance from familiar geographical environments, the transformation they undergo seems much broader than those typically contemplated in tourism studies research.

Author bio

Cecilia Bastos is a fellow researcher at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Germany. She was a postdoctoral research fellow in Social Anthropology at the National Museum/Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) from 2016 to 2022. She develops research in the field of the anthropology of complex societies, with an emphasis on the social construction of the person, covering topics such as individualism, subjectivity, pilgrimage, embodiment, emotion and spirituality. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2506-3302

[11] This shows the presence of nuances in the experiences of the travellers which could be explored further, for example I find that "the journey inward", "encountering hardship", "the experience of loneliness" are somehow a first step in the direction of "finding" oneself; and maybe, as a reviewer of this article has pointed out, these nuances could be understood as different *ways* or "means" for "finding yourself".

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