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Authenticity In Tourism And Its Environmental Impact

Exploring the Environmental Costs of Offbeat Tourism in India

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Abstract: Authentic experiences have been a driving force in shaping global tourism, taking travelers to remote and culturally rich destinations. Similarly, in the Indian context, we see that rural eco-tourism circuits are attracting more tourists. However, this ongoing trend presents us with a problem: tourists seeking untouched, pristine cultural landscapes often generate plastic waste that contributes to its degradation. The paper investigates the connection between a tourist's search for authenticity and plastic waste, especially in more ecologically fragile 'offbeat destinations,' which lack an infrastructure for the management and disposal of waste generated from increased footfall. This paper draws upon the theoretical frameworks of authenticity in the context of tourism and is grounded in secondary data from policy reports and case studies. The study identifies rising plastic waste as a key externality of offbeat tourism and argues that if authenticity is to remain a viable pillar of tourism, plastic waste management must be a priority in local governance, policy planning, and individual travel behaviour.

I Introduction

The search for authentic experiences has become a cornerstone of modern tourism, reflecting deeper sociological currents in how people find meaning and identity while traveling. Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976) gives us a glimpse into the meaning of authenticity in tourism. MacCannell sees it as the tourist searching for experiences which they considered "real," undiluted, and bound to the local culture. According to MacCannell, the modern man, unsatisfied with his regular superficial life, turns to tourism to experience what he perceives to be authentic culture and art. This search for authentic experience is, in fact, growing by the day. According to a report, 77% of travelers wish to have authentic experiences reflective of the local culture (Booking.com, 2025). This transition toward a deeper, more personalized travel is not only shaping global tourism, but it also reflects trends seen in India. As a result states like Maharashtra have planned for better infrastructure around rural and eco-tourism circuits such as Konkan and Vidarbha in their Tourism Policy (Government of Maharashtra, 2024), with tourists citing "authentic local experience" as a major factor while planning their travels.

India has emerged as a stronghold for domestic tourism, particularly after the pandemic. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, domestic tourism saw robust growth with 2,509.63 million domestic Visits in 2023, 44.98% higher than 1,731.01 million domestic visits in 2022 (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2024).

However, the environmental impact of rising tourism, especially in remote, "offbeat" destinations is a cause of concern. Many studies have mentioned tourists as key contributors to plastic waste pollution in ecologically sensitive areas. For example, the Himalayan Regions of Himachal Pradesh draws millions of

tourists to even remote high-altitude areas, owing to the cultural significance of pilgrim sites and its scenic beauty. The daily activities of large footfalls generate an unprecedented amount of waste, including plastics (G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment, 2023). India generates 9.3 million tonnes of plastic waste every year (Plastics for Change, 2024), with some estimates showing 30% of it comes from tourism (TrainingAid, 2024).

The paper investigates any nexus between the search for an authentic travel experience and its environmental impacts on remote sites, drawing upon the paradox of seeking pristine locations while contributing to their degradation.

II Methodology

The research design for this paper is rooted in secondary data analysis. It seeks to examine the correlation between tourists' search for authentic travel experiences and challenges in plastic waste management, particularly in remote or ecologically fragile destinations. The paper draws from publicly available academic articles, policy reports, case studies, and media reports.

Objective: To explore the nexus between the tourist's need for an authentic travel experience and difficulties in plastic waste management.

III Review of Literature

While exploring the concept of authenticity in the context of tourism, the best place to start might be Ning Wang's influential paper, *Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience*, published in Annals of Tourism Research; it is after all the most cited work in the sector. In this review we will discuss the ideas presented by Wang and philosophical debates that underpin them. Wang outlined the historical evolution of the concept of authenticity and introduced his own definition of *existential* authenticity, which helps us to better understand modern tourism. (Wang, 1999)

Wang started off by acknowledging the central position the search for authenticity holds in tourism. Traditionally, it was thought of as the desire of the tourist to experience "real," original places of interest and culture. This notion has an underpinning in the objectivist school of thought; the idea that reality exists independent of the observer and can be experienced through empirical observations. Under this philosophy, authenticity is object-oriented; something is authentic if it is real (similar to museum artifacts). Wang was however critical of objectivist authenticity in the context of tourism as it failed to explain modern tourism: beach vacations, amusement parks etc, where objectivist authenticity is not the primary concern.

Wang then shifts his focus to the constructivist school of thought. In this context, authenticity is not tied to an objective truth but rather it is socially constructed. The tourist may consider it authentic to view the official photocopy of Mona Lisa at Louvre or replicas of space instruments displayed by ISRO, even though they might not be the real object. The tourist is concerned with the meaning attached to their experience and the social consensus surrounding its authenticity. These notions are supported by the concept of staged authenticity brought forward by Dean MacCannell, which itself is based on Ervin Goffman's idea of frontstage and backstage. Tourists think they have entered the "real" culture, but instead experience staged versions tailored for their consumption. John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" further adds to the discussion by noting that tourists often experience a new setting through their personal cultural lens soaked with expectations and symbolic representations (Urry, 1990); taking them away from any form of objective authenticity. Urry argues that tourists do not simply travel to see things; they experience places and people through a culturally constructed lens. Media, guidebooks, advertisements, and larger social norms influence what the tourist deems worth seeing. The tourist gaze is selective, filtering experiences to ensure they are exotic, picturesque, or worthy of cultural admiration. People and local environments often adapt their behaviour or surroundings to meet these expectations, creating staged performances of "authenticity" to attract tourists. Crucially, the gaze is not a neutral one; it reinforces the power relations between tourists (often from wealthy nations) and the very people or places that are being gazed upon. One can view these concepts of authenticity and tourist gaze in action in Dharavi, Mumbai, home to the world's largest slum accommodating more than a million people in an area of approximately 2.17 square kilometres. Annually, more than 15,000 niche tourists flock to Dharavi. Slum tourism became particularly famous after the Oscar-winning Slumdog Millionaire by Danny Boyle. Since then, the busloads of foreign tourists staying in five-star hotels would come down to Dharavi to just glimpse the less-fortunate life, take selfies against their wretchedly done-up

shabby houses, and sometimes also spend a night in these homes for an immersive ghetto-life experience. The tours glamourise poverty and make it exotic for tourists, sometimes the residents put up a show of poverty to cater to the expectations of the foreign tourist idea of a slum so that they continue attracting the rich visitors.

Pushing the argument further, Wang draws on postmodern theory, particularly the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard. These postmodernists argue that the real and fake are rendered indistinguishable in conditions of hyperreality and simulacra, a term used by Eco and Baudrillard to indicate how sometimes representations become more real than reality. In Simulacra and Simulation (1981), Baudrillard describes four stages of the simulacrum: first, something that is a faithful copy of the real; second, a perversion of reality; third, a pretence that something is real; and fourth, pure simulacrum, having no relation whatsoever to any reality. At the fourth stage, the distinction between reality and representation disappears. Here, the simulacrum turns into something hyperreal-an extremely isolated form of reality built upon media, signs, and symbols, which, in some instances, feel more real than the real. Some examples would be theme parks such as Disneyland or reality shows, where a fabricated narrative is consumed as an authentic experience. Baudrillard says that late capitalist societies live in a world of simulations where meaning is not conferred by reference to the real world, but by endless iterations of signs. The erosion of the real has deep impacts upon culture, politics, and identity; making it difficult to distinguish any representation from the actual truth. Simulacra challenges our ability to understand reality, taking us into realms where the copies have outright replaced their originals. Wang builds on these ideas to argue that postmodern tourists may not seek authenticity in the traditional sense. They are interested in aesthetics, and an overall enjoyable experience. A postmodern tourist may visit a historical ruin in the morning and go to a McDonald's for dinner, remaining unconcerned with the inconsistency in authenticity of their experiences.

Lastly, Wang investigates the transformation of authenticity from object-based to experience-based. Here lies his unique contribution with the concept of existential authenticity derived from existential school of thought. Existential philosophy, drawing from thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, conceptualizes authenticity in the context of tourism as a mode of being, underlined with one's true self, an experience whereby an individual conducts themselves in accordance with one's true desires, unbound by the social norms of everyday life. Wang says that tourism opens up a space where one may escape rigid modern social roles; what Max Weber called the i*ron cage of bureaucracy* or Karl Marx termed *alienation*. The existential view of tourism ties in with Victor Turner's notion of Liminality, a state in which individuals temporarily step outside the norms of everyday life. In this liminal space, tourists enter an ambiguous state of being in which conventional roles and hierarchies are suspended. This freedom from the usual constraints nourishes a capacity for freedom and introspection. Within this temporary state, people claim to feel more real, authentic, connected, and open to new experiences. Hence, tourism transcends from being mere leisure to an intense existential pause, a brief experience of being, wherein one can rediscover or partially reconstruct oneself. Interruptions in the structured flow of daily social interactions allow for unexpected intimacies. Thus, the tourist experience becomes a site for potential transformation, often missing from daily routine. Tourists' search for authentic experiences, from the perspective of existential authenticity, consists of two parts:

Intrapersonal Authenticity: It applies to relations of a person with themselves. Tourism can spur bodily desires and impulses. For example, at the beach, tourists might strip naked, experiences restricted in everyday life. Wang notes that this type of authenticity allows spontaneity, freedom, and indulgence in the self.

Interpersonal Authenticity: Wang explores how tourism promotes genuine social relations. Free of social hierarchies and routines, tourists have the possibility of engaging with each other, strangers, locals, or even family members, in a more genuine way.

IV The Cost of Authenticity

Wang and others show that tourists, even modern tourists, seek authentic travel experiences; moments when they feel connected with the local culture, confront unfamiliar norms, or step out of their everyday lives. Authenticity, in a sense, lies in difference: the more unfamiliar the environment is, the more meaningful it is. In search of such experiences, tourists are venturing out of urban centres to remote rural and 'offbeat' destinations. These places often have markers of social consensus around authenticity: unspoiled landscapes, traditional lifestyles and local cuisines. As connectivity improves, the boundary of where tourists are willing and able to go is being steadily pushed. But while access improves, infrastructure around waste management lags behind.

Several studies have shown that solid waste generation directly increases with tourist influx, especially in ecologically fragile zones. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh, while Shimla, Kullu, and Kangra districts registered the highest levels of waste production during peak tourist seasons. In 2017, these districts received millions of visitors; Kullu alone received 3.8 million visitors and waste generation peaked at 46.6 tons per day (TPD) in Kullu, 94.6 TPD in Shimla and 45.1 TPD in Kangra. When footfall dwindled between 2017 and 2020, waste generation also declined. Similar trends have been recorded all over the Indian Himalayan Region. Strong positive correlation between tourist arrivals and monthly waste has been noted in Leh ($r^2 = 0.92$, $p < 0.01$), Shimla ($r = 0.80$) and Kullu ($r = 0.96$). And the Amarnath Yatra induces a sharp rise in solid waste in Jammu and Kashmir. Even in the well-regulated state of Sikkim, certain protected areas such as Singalila National Park witness a seasonal rise in plastic waste in months of peak travel. (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change [MoEFCC], 2024)

From Janjira Fort, where officers from Archaeological Survey of India collected 3,000 plastic bottles in a single weekend, to Kalsubai Peak—Maharashtra's highest point—where trekking paths are strewn with wrappers, bottles, and flip-flops, the plastic footprint of authenticity-seeking tourists is becoming impossible to ignore (Madaan, 2023; Jain, 2022). Volunteer cleanups point towards the severity of the problem. Over 10,500 kg of non-biodegradable waste has been removed from 18 waterfalls since 2016 by an environmental group in Nerul (Navi Mumbai), an indication of how *hidden spots* are turning into dumping sites (Chatterjee, 2020).

While the generation of plastic waste is a problem, the lack of effective formal measures to manage large volumes of it adds to the catastrophe. Remote mountain tops, trekking routes, waterfalls, and forts rarely have local capacity to segregate, collect, or process plastics. Unlike cities, these remote locations do not have recycling plants or incinerators, and channeling waste out is often either impractical or gets overlooked altogether.

India's waste management infrastructure has not kept pace with growing plastic waste. Approximately 77% of waste generated in Indian cities is dumped into open landfills without undergoing treatment. From the rest, only 60% of the plastic waste generated is recycled, usually inefficiently and without any formal structure. From bags to straws, cutlery, and packaging materials, single-use plastics form the bulk of our waste (Plastics for Change, 2024). Despite being banned, single-use plastic still scatters across India, hinting at weak enforcement and lack of low-cost alternatives. The 2022 ban on select single use plastics has largely remained on paper as these plastics continue to be cheap and readily available.

However, more than a decade ago, Matheran offered a strong case for effective interventions. Matheran, a small eco-sensitive hill station in Maharashtra, saw around 250,000 tourists in a year, all for a local population of 4,500. Tourism-induced plastic pollutants, with the bulk of them being PET bottles and laminates, was a major environmental threat to its delicate forest ecosystem. Hence, the Indian Centre for Plastics in the Environment (ICPE) facilitated a collaborative intervention with the Matheran Municipal Council, the Matheran Bachao Samiti (MBS), Bisleri Ltd., the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), and local hoteliers and shopkeepers. ICPE started by generating awareness among the councillors and hoteliers about plastic pollution and its ecological impact and also distributed leaflets on segregation with suggestions for structured disposal. Bisleri installed compactor machines for PET bottles and started reverse logistics for its recycling. MCGM pushed for vermiculture to manage wet waste alongside dry waste collection points and also mobilised community awareness through schools. The area was subsequently declared as a plastic-free zone. By October 2002, there was visible reduction in litter in the public places, with a very committed stakeholder base. This decentralised, multi-actor approach offers a model that can be replicated in other ecotourism areas for waste management. (ICPE, Matheran: Plastic waste management initiatives)

Remote tourist sites very much need tailored waste management measures, as their ecology faces growing challenges, the foremost of which is plastic pollution. At an international level, the United Nations has set up the Global Tourism Plastics Initiative (GTPI) that brings together stakeholders of the tourism sector so that they may tackle the root causes of plastic waste. The initiative called on signatories to commit themselves to a set of practical targets that included: replacing single-use plastics with reusable alternatives; ensuring that all plastic packaging is either reusable, recyclable, or compostable; promoting increasing amounts of recycled content in plastic products; and putting funds into systems that would increase recycling and composting rates. Moreover, it mandates transparent and annual reporting on progress (UNWTO, n.d.). While cities may

improve their systems eventually, offbeat destinations cannot wait any longer. Without intervention, plastic waste poses dangers to the environment and to the very authenticity that attracts tourists. We need to reduce plastics at the source, and we need to establish effective strategies to safely process and dispose of plastic waste. Otherwise, authenticity may well prove to be its own undoing.

V Conclusion

Tourists will continue to seek immersive, offbeat, and 'authentic' travel experiences thanks to which states like Maharashtra are actively promoting rural eco-tourism circuits. However, without a parallel focus on sustainability, particularly plastic waste management, such efforts risk undermining the very authenticity they aim to showcase. Plastic waste constitutes a disproportionate percentage of the overall ecological footprint of tourism. It is lightweight, non-biodegradable, often abandoned in remote areas where formal waste management systems do not exist. Matheran offers a glimmer of hope, as a counterexample. Owing to the coordinated efforts at different levels, Matheran successfully reduced its plastic pollution levels.

While India's policy frameworks, including the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 (Amendments in 2018, 2021, and 2024) and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) are well laid-down, bottlenecks in implementation persist. Local bodies often lack resources and tourists have remained ignorant of the long-term consequences of their consumption patterns. To curb plastic pollution, the focus on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) must be intensified, with special attention given to SDGs 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and 13 (Climate Action). Plastic waste pollutes waters, destroys ecosystems, and contributes to greenhouse gases its entire life cycle. It must be tackled through a holistic approach that intertwines environmental, health, and development concerns. Clean and Green Village must not be just a front; it should be a cornerstone of sustainable rural development. Clean water systems, free of plastic contaminants, prepared with waste disposal, and climate-resilient livelihoods are necessary for environmental integrity, improved public health, and means to conserve biodiversity. At the local level, Panchayats, community organisations, and civil societies can initiate innovative and context-specific solutions such as plastic-free markets, community recycling centres, and alternative packaging. Grassroots approaches thus prove imperative in realizing the global SDG framework into daily practice.

If authentic travel experiences are to remain viable and meaningful, sustainability must become central to tourism planning. Plastic waste management cannot be an afterthought; it must permeate local governance and tourism policies and should even influence individual travel behaviours. The future of authenticity in tourism rests on whether it can preserve that which is real while consciously avoiding contributing to its degradation.

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