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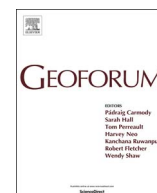
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# Empowering the empowered? Slum tourism and the depoliticization of poverty

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## ABSTRACT

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

## 1. Introduction

I'm on a flight from London to Mumbai. As the aeroplane descends, I look out across a vast, continuous landscape of brown corrugated rooftops and blue plastic sheeting. This is India's infamous slums. The plane lands, I collect my luggage and find a taxi. On the way to the hotel, the driver shows me various temples, mosques and attractions. He points out a modern skyscraper and tells me that this is 'Antilla', the world's most expensive residential property, with an estimated value of US\$2 billion. It is the home of Mukesh Ambani, an Indian businessman and one of the richest people in the world, with a net worth of around US\$20 billion (Forbes, 2016). Although only four members of the Ambani family live here, 600 workers are employed to take care of its 27 floors, three helipads, six floors of car parking, hanging gardens, gymnasiums, theater, and ballroom. How can this be? How did this person come to amass so much wealth in a country where over 360 million people live on less than US\$1.25 a day (Rangarajan, 2014). Why do so many people continue to live in abject poverty? India is not the only country that grapples with this problem, nor the only place where there are vast differences between the richest and the poorest, although Ambani's net worth is gigantic, even by global standards. It is not unusual to see great wealth butt up against gruelling poverty in India, yet this was a remarkable juxtaposition. Later that day, as I read my guidebook, I come across a charity that offers tours of Dharavi,

reportedly Asia's largest slum. I book a place. This article provides an account of my visit and the empirical analyses that followed. The first part provides a critical overview of the literature, starting with the historical context of slums and research on slum tourism. In the second half, I introduce the case study of Dharavi and present my findings, which are drawn from an ethnographic account of the slum tour and a thematic analysis of over 200 TripAdvisor reviews. In this section, I argue that the tour operators and tourists jointly construct a view of poverty that is normalized, even romanticized. It is seen as neutral, natural and benign, rather than something deadly, which diminishes wellbeing and threatens life. Poverty is depoliticized. Visitors leave the slum feeling happy and satisfied to have witnessed the 'real' and 'authentic' India, but the potential for development is hindered as residents are left with little prospect of change.

## 2. Slums: a global issue

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

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

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

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

expected to move from the Indian countryside to Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai over the next ten years (Iyer and Macomber, 2010). Historical records show that the population of Mumbai's suburbs rose by an astronomical 3555 per cent between 1911 and 2011 (Shaikh, 2014). By 2030, the city is estimated to have a population in excess of 28 million (Hindustan Times, 2014).

### 3. Slum tourism: arguments and evidence

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

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

sensibility. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that slum tourism leads to any detrimental impact on residents and on the whole, slum dwellers bear no ill feeling towards tourists. A study of Dharavi slum in Mumbai found that only 12 per cent of slum residents expressed negative or sceptical views of slum tourism (Slikker, 2014). Moreover, Slikker and Koens (2015) show that these views became more positive over time, as residents learn more about slum tourism. Privitera (2015) is one of the few writers to actively praise tour companies for providing real and authentic exchanges that confront stereotypes and enable people to understand other cultures. Yet how far slum tourism promotes an ‘exchange’ is a matter for debate. Ma’s (2010) thesis found that slum residents wanted more direct interaction with tourists. In her case study of the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro, Freire-Medeiros (2012) shows that 84 per cent of slum residents were positive about tourism and a further 9 per cent felt indifferent. This empirical data contradicts the suspicions of voyeurism and serves as a useful reminder to be cautious of these accusations. At the same time, tourists’ motivations remain largely unattended to. There is also the argument that foreigners should be exposed to the negative impacts of global capitalism. Advocates such as Frenzel and Koens (2012) ask how any change will ever take place if there is no engagement. Robinson (2012) claims that tourism raises awareness of the realities of slum conditions.

Whilst recognizing the potential for voyeurism, other writers infer that this is offset by the advantages to the local community. It is argued that tourism can bring financial benefit and contribute to international development (see the work of tourism academic Harold Goodwin). However, there are many accounts that show that local populations don’t benefit at all, especially when the negative impacts are taken into account in a cost-benefit analysis (Fennell, 2006). The supposed ‘trickle down’ effect has now been widely debunked (Scheyvens, 2010). Whilst some specificity would be useful in terms of benefits to the community, government, country or city, there is currently little evidence to support the economic development argument on a local level, other than what appears to be a handful of small-scale and individual cases of entrepreneurship (Kieti and Magio, 2013; Koens, 2012; Rogerson, 2004; Koens and Thomas, 2015). As the continued growth of slums is stimulated and maintained by global factors, even if slum tourism was effective in terms of development, it would be at such a low level that it would have little impact against the march of neoliberalism.

For other writers such as the sociologist Bianca Freires-Medeiros (2009), the key issue centers on the commercialization of poverty, raising questions around who benefits. Yet there is no evidence to demonstrate that slum communities are disadvantaged or even adversely affected. Implicit in this argument is the idea that tour operators or governments benefit. The literature is not brimming with accounts of unscrupulous tour companies and there is little evidence to suggest that governments are profiting in any meaningful way. In most cases, politicians are not in favor of slum tourism. The Indian government condemned it as it was seen to misrepresent the country, undermine its tourism efforts and counter its success story of economic development. However, there is no evidence to support this either. It seems to be more a case of national pride. Slums in Delhi that could not be relocated in time for the Commonwealth Games in 2010 were fenced off with bamboo screens and hidden from visitors (Basu, 2012). This also happened in Rio de Janeiro, as tourists arriving for the Olympic Games were shielded from the Alemão favela complex by a colorful wall of murals, nicknamed the ‘Wall of Shame’ by locals (Cavalcante, 2016). When Michael Jackson visited Rio’s slums in 1996 to shoot a music video, the authorities responded with indignation, believing that it would denigrate the city’s image and jeopardize its future bid for the Olympic Games (Freires-Medeiros, 2009).

Whilst the literature is preoccupied with the ethics of slum tourism, very little attention is paid to power, which is largely absent from the discussions. Even the edited collection of essays on the topic *Slum Tourism: Poverty, Power and Ethics* (Frenzel et al., 2012) is devoid of any serious engagement with theories of power. The special issue of the

journal *Tourism Geographies* on slum tourism<sup>1</sup> barely discusses power, with the exception of Dürr (2012), although this account remains un-theorized. Similarly, Fabian Frenzel’s comprehensive study of slum tourism (2016) does not look at power, despite its grounding in cultural studies theory.

#### 4. Slum tourism at Dharavi

Dharavi currently occupies a plot of land that covers 1.75 km<sup>2</sup>, which is roughly half the size of Central Park in New York. It is home to one million people. With an average of five people per household, 48 per cent live in houses under 10 m<sup>2</sup>, and 43 per cent in spaces under 20 m<sup>2</sup>. This density makes it over six times as populous as daytime Manhattan (Reality Tours website). Dharavi has one of the highest real estate values in the world and with close proximity to the airport, it is perpetually at risk of demolition.<sup>2</sup> The Indian government has been attempting to relocate residents through slum resettlement programs for decades. This longstanding project to move people into nearby purpose-built high-rises has repeatedly stalled. Rather than resettlement being seen as the failure of the state in the first place and a social responsibility to resolve, it is viewed as a lucrative business opportunity. Proposals for improvement programs tend to be devised independently of slum residents and fail to take the needs of the community into account (Verma, 2002). For example, the proposed high-rises would maximize space and allow for luxury retail and hotel units, but would eradicate the slum’s flourishing micro-enterprises, with residents living and working in close proximity. Dharavi is part of India’s ‘informal economy’, which accounts for 90 per cent of the country’s employment and includes shopkeepers, farmers, construction workers, taxi drivers and street vendors (Yardley, 2011). Removing, disrupting or jeopardizing it through insensitive resettlement programs would be disastrous. Hence, these programs are always controversial. Architect and planner Gita Dewan Verma (2002) notes the lack of evidence in demonstrating the success of resettlement programs, and argues that many of these lead to new slums, as they are not integrated into existing infrastructure. They perpetuate unequal access to essential services, keep slum communities segregated from wider society and leave large and growing numbers of poor people in substandard conditions. Indeed a redevelopment program of Dharavi in 1985 made some changes but ultimately failed to change the overall nature and character of the slum (Patel and Arputham, 2007). Whilst resettlement has a long and complex history (since the 1950s, according to Basu, 2012), the current plans are more ambitious and involve a range of international investors with competing interests.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst resettlement proposals are continually redrafted and programs stalled and shelved, corporate development surges, displacing more people and placing increasing pressure on scarce resources. This has created a niche for slum tourism, which began in India in 2006. Reality Tours was the first company to organize commercial slum tours and is now the largest, catering for 15,000 tourists annually. It has grown rapidly over the last ten years, partly due to the box office success of the British film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which grossed over US \$377 million worldwide. Originally a charity and now a non-governmental organization, Reality Tours invests 80 per cent of its profits from tours, merchandise and donations into computer, English and life skills classes for children and young people living in the slums.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Special issue of *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment* on ‘Global Perspectives on Slum Tourism’. 2012. 14 (2).

<sup>2</sup> The residents of Vidigal favela in Rio de Janeiro face a similar threat with their panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean, forested mountains and sweeping views of Ipanema beach. Developers have already moved in and opened the first luxury boutique hotel in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Patel and Arputham (2007) for a comprehensive discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Most children have never left the slum and do not interact with anyone outside, so they need help with personal grooming, hygiene and sex education.



## 5. Methods, data and analysis

The empirical findings begin with an ethnographic account of a slum tour, where I acted as a participant observer, engaging in the tour and in conversations with the tour guide and other visitors. The second phase of the empirical work involved examining 236 TripAdvisor reviews by slum tourists. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a form of qualitative analysis that involves identifying recurring themes and patterns. This method was chosen for its rigor. It is a time-consuming and labor-intensive approach, but it allows for a thorough and detailed analysis. It was also selected for its versatility. It is not theoretically bound to a particular discipline or wedded to an epistemological position. It can be used on any type of data and any size of data set.

Thematic analysis is a rigorous process of data familiarization, coding, theme development and revision. It goes beyond counting words or phrases, and involves identifying implicit and explicit ideas within raw data. These ideas are categorized through a process of close reading and inductive coding, which means that ideas are generated and driven by the data, rather than the researcher looking for pre-defined ideas that are decided in advance. The analytical procedure then moves onto theme development and review through a process of detailed note-making and visual mapping techniques. The categories are then conceptually developed into themes, which are examined in context so that their meanings can be explored.<sup>5</sup>

An ethnographic approach enabled me to describe, critique and analyse my visit to the slum. The TripAdvisor reviews similarly shed light on first-hand experience of slum tours. TripAdvisor claims to be the world's largest travel site, covering the whole globe and featuring over 465 million reviews, written by tourists ([TripAdvisor website](http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk)). This user-generated content allows readers to build a picture of slum life in Dharavi. These 'mediated imaginaries' (Frenzel, 2016:187) shape the way that people think about the slum. For those interested in slum life or visiting Dharavi, these accounts are influential. Dharavi is rated as more of an attraction than the cave temples of Mumbai's Elephanta Island, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Frenzel, 2016). This further boosts the number of visitors to the slum. TripAdvisor offers a rich source of easily accessible and readily available data.

### 5.1. Ethnography of the slum tour

On the morning of the slum visit, the tourists assembled in downtown Mumbai. The group comprised white westerners from Britain, Germany, France, Sweden, and America. Our young male Indian guide was a university graduate. We took a train north to Mahim, a 25-minute journey, where we joined another 20 or so white western tourists and several more young male Indian guides. I chatted to the other tourists. They were teachers, architects, financial analysts, web designers, charity workers, and administrators. We walked for a further ten minutes until we reached our destination, where we were split into small groups of six. Larger groups would be intrusive and impractical due to the size of the buildings, staircases, and alleyways. The tour began with a statement about the productivity of the slum, with its 10,000 different businesses and an annual turnover of US\$665 million, generated from its hutment industries. I queried this figure, as the population itself is one million, and we had just been told that many of those who own businesses no longer live in Dharavi. This was brushed off as we headed into the slum.

Our first stop was a plastics recycling hut. Scavengers scour the city for bottles in waste bins, on roadsides, and in refuse tips. The material is collected and brought to Dharavi where it is sorted, broken down, washed, melted and moulded into pellets, ready to be made back into

bottles and other items. A child came over to the group to ask for money. After a curt conversation in Hindi, she was sent away. We were told that this was highly unusual and normally never happens. The next stop was an aluminium-recycling shed, where we observed a similar process. This time, paint was being burnt off discarded tins and barrels. This was dirty and dangerous work. The factories are small single rooms, filled with smoke and the acrid smell of melting materials. Male workers were crouched in the dusty darkness beside their furnaces. Dressed in vests and sandals, and in some cases, without shirts or shoes, they poured the molten aluminium into moulds on the dusty floor. I asked our guide about access to fresh water and electricity, and he replied: 'Oh, they have all of that. Let's move on!'

Other industries looked similarly hazardous. Kilns pumped out thick black smoke in the pottery section, which made vision and breathing difficult. In the tanneries, the stench from the animal carcasses brought from the nearby abattoirs was so strong that we had to cover our faces. The men pounded the skins of dead animals to remove the remaining flesh and fat. They stuck their arms into barrels of chemical dyes containing the soaking hides. Next door was a shop that sold purses, wallets, and bags. We were told that the leather produced here is sold to luxury brands such as *Gucci*. The tourists were impressed. As we entered the shop, our guide told us not to forget to barter.

Bakeries produced breads, cakes, and biscuits. Laundries washed and ironed the sheets and towels of the luxury hotels of Mumbai. There were cloth, clothing and soap manufacturers. Women were making poppads, which they draped over baskets and left to dry in the sun, amidst children playing with animals. All of these goods supply stores and restaurants across the city and beyond. The products remain unbranded, as any association with the slum would render them unsaleable. So Dharavi is part of a complex supply chain that not only furnishes its own community, but Mumbai, and other cities and regions across the country, as well as the global luxury goods and services market.

The visits to the hutments were followed by a tour of the domestic areas of the slum. We traversed tiny, dark, densely-packed alleyways, which were too narrow to walk two abreast. We passed by houses, where we caught a glimpse of life inside. The smell of frying onions and spices permeated the air. I saw flashes of interior space as we quickly darted past. I was conscious of intruding and also compelled to look. I observed the makeshift, fragile, slippery pipes of the rudimentary sewerage system that we were stepping over. I asked our guide about sanitation but I did not get a response. It was hard to converse at this point, as we were walking in single file amidst the cacophony. Every now and again, the alleyways opened out into small streets, where people washed themselves using buckets of cold water and children played in the dirt. The kids smiled and waved and laughed, and said: 'Hello, do you speak English? What's your name?' However, nobody paid us any attention most of the time. There was no hostility nor any curiosity from the adults. There was no sense that we had invaded their privacy. We were largely ignored and met with indifference.

We went to the community center in the final stage of the tour, which houses the education program. Rows of smiling faces lined the walls. By this point, we were weary. We were given more information on funding, which comes from tour income and donations. The number of residents who can access the programs is relatively small in comparison with the overall population. Whilst this is laudable work, only 6000 young people have been involved in the program so far (0.6 per cent of the population). Finally, we were taken to the Reality Tours office and shop, where we had the chance to buy merchandise and make a donation. Nobody bought anything or made a donation, yet they had clearly enjoyed the tour and were effusive about the company and its work. I reflected on this on the train on my way back to the city as I wiped a tissue over my face to remove a fine layer of dust. The following day, I received an email from Reality Tours, asking me to leave a review on TripAdvisor to 'rate my experience', and pointing me to the website to learn more about 'how to get involved'. The email also

<sup>5</sup> For more information about thematic analysis and clear instructions on how to do it, see Braun and Clarke (2006).

linked to a collection of online images that we were encouraged to circulate and share, as there was a strict ‘no-photography’ policy to discourage voyeurism and minimize intrusion.

### 5.2. TripAdvisor analysis

The second stage of my empirical work involved analyzing the TripAdvisor reviews, which were predominantly positive. In sampling the reviews, I was only interested in those that had visited Dharavi with Reality Tours. Out of 236 reviews, 48 per cent (113) rated the tour as ‘excellent’, 19 per cent (45) rated it ‘very good’, 18 per cent (44) ‘average’, 7 per cent (16) ‘poor’ and 8 per cent (18) ‘terrible’. On closer inspection, the negative comments tended to be short and had been posted by Indian citizens who were outraged by the government’s inactivity on slums. None of them were associated with the tour but were general comments about the proliferation of slums in India, seeing them as ‘dirty’, ‘chaotic’, ‘unhygienic’ and ‘dangerous’ environments. I disregarded these comments, as they were not related to the tour itself. The positive (‘excellent’/‘very good’) comments were longer and more detailed. Three of these reviews were analytical in nature, seeking to explore the socio-political issues and possible plans of action to address poverty. The rest were uncritical descriptions, which I categorized into two main themes: visitors’ perceptions and visitors’ experiences.

In terms of perceptions, the comments were further classified into two key themes: industry and community. In terms of industry, the slum residents were viewed in a positive light and seen as ‘hard-working’, ‘busy’, ‘industrious’, ‘resilient’, ‘resourceful’, ‘enterprising’, ‘productive’, ‘ingenious’ and ‘energetic’. Descriptive phrases were used, referring to the slum as an ‘economic powerhouse’ and a ‘thriving cottage industry’ that ‘provided essential services’. There was a normative moral subtext of independence and self-sufficiency, with comments around the lack of ‘hand-outs’ and the ‘contribution to society’ made by the residents. The slum was seen as ‘efficient’, ‘functional’ and ‘organized’. The majority of these comments did not mention or acknowledge the glaring poverty. For some, there was even a seeming refusal to accept that the slum was a place of deficiency and disadvantage, for example:

*‘I expected to see a slum ... it was most unlike a slum. It is more like a brisk business. Lovely leather products at fantastic prices’*

By presenting Dharavi as a site of business, products, and prices, the reviewer is able to eschew the political dimensions of the slum. As such, it is not recognized as a slum and possibly even denied its slum status. Meschkank’s empirical study found that tourists rejected the idea of Dharavi as a slum. They disliked the word, instead favoring ‘less developed area’ (2012:152). One participant stated: ‘I might not automatically call it a slum’ (2012:154). Meschkank concluded that ‘tourists doubted Dharavi’s status as a slum generally’ as they didn’t see it as representing ‘true poverty’ (2012:155). Poverty was obscured for many by the manufacturing nature of the site, which was emphasized by the tour. Ironically, it is the industrial processing that has a further detrimental impact on the living conditions of the residents. Living and working in the same place is convenient, but it comes with health implications due to the toxic nature of many of the industries. Indian economist Madhura Swaminathan (1995) argues that slum residents are the worst victims of industrial pollution. She refers to a study of the leather-making factories at Dharavi, which showed the tanneries to be a major source of pollution, with animal remains, effluent and chemicals found in wastewater, contaminating the air, land, and water.

By highlighting the commercial aspect, the online reviewer in the quote above is unable to reconcile the idea that Dharavi could be both a slum and a site of business and trade. Slums are often economically vibrant (Cities Alliance website). The notion of income repeatedly came through and many reviewers commented on the ‘bargains’ on offer. Related to this was a steadfast belief that for many residents, living in the slum was an ‘active lifestyle choice’ and that people were there ‘by

choice, not by chance’, suggesting that living in Dharavi was not down to a set of life circumstances that people are born into and find it difficult to escape from. Banerjee and Dufo (2006) argue that the self-employed poor typically have no specialized skills and practice multiple occupations. Karnani’s research claims that most poor people are not self-employed by choice and that the romanticized view of the poor as ‘resilient and creative entrepreneurs’ (2009:81) unhelpfully over-emphasizes microcredit as a means of reducing poverty, rather than steady employment on reasonable wages. This is all very much in line with India’s reputation for its entrepreneurial energy and resourcefulness (Tharoor, 2007).

For many Dharavi visitors, poverty was less visible and even invisible for some. For others, it was certainly misunderstood and in some cases, even normalized. Visitors remarked: ‘I’m sure this is not the worst living conditions in Mumbai’ and consistently commented on residents having televisions, as if this was the 1950s when TV sets were luxury items. Dharavi was heralded as a ‘five-star slum’. It was repeatedly claimed that it housed ‘millionaires’ and ‘billionaires’. This points to a broader issue about income. Verma (2002) helpfully connects these points in her book on Indian slums, explaining that residents are not always poor in terms of income, relatively, but that living in slum conditions contributes to poverty. Time, energy and money are disproportionately spent trying to access basic services, such as fetching clean water. Swaminathan (1995) reports that even where clean water is available, it is often in short and patchy supply, and insufficient for the needs of a family. For example, it is not unusual for women to get up at 3am to spend hours collecting water. She cites a study that also shows that slum residents can pay up to 20 times more for water than the rest of the population (SPARC, 1994). This is not the only expense where slum residents are penalized. Verma (2002) claims that expenses on health services are higher for those living in slums because the conditions lead to major illnesses, which are more expensive to treat. Likewise, Riley et al. (2007) argue that because slum residents are neglected populations, the health sector only becomes aware of diseases at a relatively late stage. This means that they are more severe and complicated to treat, and frequently result in death. So there are multiple aspects to urban poverty that do not disappear when income increases, which is a widespread misconception. This cycle keeps people locked into poverty.

In light of the comments on the relative wealth of the slum residents, I continued to reflect on Dharavi’s turnover of US\$665 million. This is the gross figure, not net profit, so does not take expenses such as labor, overheads, and materials into account. Also, as our tour guide explained to us, many of those running slum businesses no longer live there, which raises the question of what percentage of turnover is actually going to the residents. This cannot be much, as the population of Dharavi is one million. Nor does this figure compare favorably with the average annual minimum wage for factory workers in India, which is US\$694 (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2015).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the claims by reviewers of ‘millionaires’ and ‘billionaires’ seem tragically misguided.

The TripAdvisor reviewers also perceived the inhabitants to be ‘happy’, ‘proud’, ‘friendly’, ‘welcoming’, ‘spirited’, ‘vibrant’ and ‘contented’. The slum was seen as a place where people ‘flourished’ and ‘thrived’. Some visitors also claimed to feel ‘at home’ at Dharavi, with one reviewer stating that the residents were ‘just like you and me’. In one review, a visitor wrote:

*‘Friendly children smiled ... The dignity of the human experience shone brightly ... neighbours watched out for each other ... A model for the world’*

<sup>6</sup> Ascertaining the minimum wage in India is complicated, as there are continual labor reforms, an enormous workforce, and high levels of informal and unorganized work. There is also significant variation between regions, in line with differences in living costs. I have used calculations from the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, which takes these factors into account (see Asia Floor Wage Alliance website, 2017).

When Asia's largest slum is endorsed as 'a model for the world', there is an ignorance of poverty. Residents were repeatedly seen to be 'living here quite happily', having an 'abundance of life', living in an 'absence of anger and bitterness', and demonstrating that 'your life circumstances don't define you'. This rejects the widely recognized notion that for the vast majority of people, where you are born and the circumstances into which you are born, tend to dictate your lot in life. Reviewers repeatedly asserted that they 'didn't see suffering', whilst residents were deemed to be 'high on life' and able to 'find happiness in the smallest things'. Aside from these comments being highly patronizing, they overlook the endless drudgery of poverty, the substandard living conditions of the slum residents and the degraded environments that, in Swaminathan's words (1995), are not suitable for human habitation. If these people are not deemed to be in need, then who is? This data connects with other empirical accounts. For example, media studies scholar Mehita Iqani's analysis of slum tourists' comments was rife with accounts of the grace and ease in which the poor shouldered the burden of poverty. Visitors celebrated the slum residents' smiles, 'good spirits' and 'strong sense of togetherness' (2016:74) declaring that 'beauty and happiness can exist in poverty too!' (2016:75). Social scientist Émilie Crossley's research on western volunteer tourism in deprived communities in rural Kenya found exactly this tendency. Her interviewees consistently emphasized the perceived happiness of the residents. One participant even expressed 'surprise' and was 'possibly disappointed' (2012:248) that she had traveled a long way to find that the residents were not as unhappy as she had expected them to be. Crossley noted that the tourists used the cheerfulness of the local children to characterize the whole community, which created 'a comforting illusion' (2012:249). Residents were deemed 'poor but happy' (2012:249), which is a narrative that was widespread across the TripAdvisor reviews. Fabian Frenzel notes the tendency of tourists to cling onto the idea of 'the inherent goodness of poor people' (2016:156). Ruth Williams looks at travel memoirs, where poor children are described as having faces 'drenched with luminescence' (2014:624) and a beauty that enables them to 'transcend' their own poverty (2014:624). One traveler sees Indian women engaged in hard labor and questions how they can be so happy 'doing this rough work under such terrible conditions?' (Williams 2014:624). Williams notes that this hardship is utilized for the tourist's own creative inspiration. In this case, poverty is noted but happiness is also assumed. Similarly, Kate Simpson's study of western gap year volunteer tourists in South America found that the deprived locals were perceived as happy and that their poverty was seen to be counterbalanced by their emotional, spiritual and community 'wealth' (2004:688).

From the reviews on TripAdvisor, it was clear that the tours follow a very prescriptive route. They go to the same factories in the same order every time. There is minimal, if any, interaction with the residents. Therefore, claims of contentment and happiness are based purely on assumptions. It is reasonable to presume that there is some happiness or moments of happiness amongst residents, but the overarching sentiment here is excessive and verges on romanticization. Slum residents work seven days a week, from before the sun rises until after it goes down. No weekends. No holidays. No sick pay. No downtime. No pensions. No retirement. They have worked like this since they were children and will continue until they die. They exist in tiny, cramped, overpopulated spaces, often with only one room in which to cook, sleep, eat and live, with little access to proper healthcare and education. Studies by writers such as Boo (2013), Davis (2006) and Verma (2002) paint a picture of slum life as a cycle of hardship and toil on the edge of survival, rather than 'an abundance of happiness'. These accounts sit in stark contrast to the 'model for the world' described by the foreign visitors. Poverty was rolled into a distorted yet romanticized notion of contentment, humility, and community. This tendency to romanticize poverty echoes Simpson's (2004) findings on the perceptions of western tourists in deprived communities in Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Similarly, postcolonial writer Arundhati Roy's (2009) critique of the film

*Slumdog Millionaire* argues that Indian slum life and its attendant poverty is romanticized. This may account for the fact that none of the tourists made a donation or purchased any merchandise at the end of the tour. The slum residents were simply deemed not to be in emotional, practical or financial need. This corroborates the findings of urban geographers Jones and Sanyal (2015), who explored how the use of slum tours shaped perceptions of Dharavi. They concluded that the narrative of the slum as a site of industry and harmony lulled elites into thinking that 'the poor are getting by and do not need help or fundamental shifts in the structure of the global economy' (2015:438). Similarly, Iqani's analysis of slum tourism in Cape Town, Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro concludes that tourists do not see any 'need to change the system' (2016:75).

The experience of the tourists themselves also dominated the reviews. Visitors reported that the slum tour was 'eye opening', 'life-changing' and 'mind-blowing'. They found it 'uplifting', 'inspiring' and 'enriching', and were satisfied that they had discovered the 'real' and 'authentic' India. This was notwithstanding the fact that thousands of others have also experienced the exact same tour, with the exact same route, to the exact same script. These affirmative statements suggest that the perceptions of the tourists didn't just change, but that the experience was genuinely transformative and, in their words, 'unforgettable'. These accounts raise questions about what and who these tours are for. They are undoubtedly for tourists, in order to witness life in the slum, but there is obviously a longer-term goal of social change. For an ethically and socially responsible charity like Reality Tours, the visits are presumably a call to action, going beyond a mere leisure pursuit for the white middle classes. They are for the residents – both directly, as the money from the tours goes into the education program but also indirectly, in the hope that slum tourism leads to social and economic development, although there is no evidence base to support this.

## 6. The depoliticization of poverty

So the positive and upbeat narrative of the slum tour was replicated in the TripAdvisor comments. These representations are in danger of obscuring poverty and undermining the reality of Dharavi. Katherine Boo's book (2013), based on a three-year ethnography of a Mumbai slum, provides a vivid yet bleak portrait of slum life and how difficult it is to exist and survive in an environment of turpitude, hardship, and suffering. These exaggerated positive narratives are distortions that cause us, at best, to make overly optimistic assumptions about the lives of those living and working in the slum, and, at worst, to misunderstand the harsh reality of modern-day poverty.

What brings these data sets and analyses together is a depoliticization of poverty within a broader context of neoliberalism. Reality Tours aims to challenge and change the perception of poverty by encouraging visitors to reconsider their prejudices so that we no longer think of slums as despairing places inhabited by hopeless people. The slum residents were presented and perceived as productive and hard-working, but also content and happy. As the reviews show, poverty was ignored, denied, overlooked and romanticized, but moreover, it was depoliticized. Slums are a casualty of corporate development and the upshot of this land grabbing is more people in less space, which creates slum conditions. Depoliticization is seen as a defining practice of neoliberalism (Peck, 2008). The tour was completely decontextualized so its related neoliberal narrative was absent. By not discussing the factors that create and maintain slums, the site and its attendant poverty were detached from its origins. Instead, structural inequalities were rendered invisible. To add further complexity, poverty was obfuscated through a pro-neoliberal subtext, which permeated the tour narrative and the tourists' reviews. Slum residents were framed as 'hardworking', 'entrepreneurial', 'independent' and 'self-sufficient', as opposed to being dependent on welfare payments. Importantly, they were seen as 'happy' and 'contented'. These were good and willing neoliberal subjects,

toiling without complaint, which tourists deemed admirable. This chimes with anthropologist Jeff Maskovsky's (2001) work on urban poverty, which describes how neoliberalism recasts sites of poverty from dependent places to productive spaces. He differentiates between the 'productive' and 'unproductive' poor, in the same vein as the 18th century notions that divided the poor into the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', which still exists in many countries today. As neoliberalism quantifies and commodifies all aspects of daily life, unproductive people are marginalized whilst productive people become 'subjects of value' (Smith 1997:222). Since neoliberalism is rooted in a system of production and consumption, the tourists themselves can equally be seen as compliant neoliberal subjects. All tourist destinations can be classified as commodified spaces, but tourists here are seeking a journey of self-discovery, where their own transformation is central. In this context, 'spiritual materialism' (Williams, 2014:618) is essential. By consuming the 'authentic' culture, the tourists inculcate a self-empowered spiritual awakening, and by retaining a depoliticized viewpoint, difficult questions about poverty can be sidestepped, allowing them to be free consumers. Similarly, by presenting working life in the slums as uncomplicated and devoid of stress, it somehow becomes pure and moral. This corresponds with Mendes, who sees *Slumdog Millionaire* as presenting 'a romanticized version of Indian poverty, skilfully depoliticized ... packaged for consumption' (2010:478). Roy's (2009) interpretation of the film argues that it portrays destitution as something that can be overcome through perseverance. This comes through in Iqani's analysis, where tourists admired the way that the 'united community work together to improve their quality of life' (2016:74) and show little recognition of the structural basis of poverty. Some writers argue that this type of tourism is a form of colonialism (Larasati, 2010; Roy, 2010; Williams, 2014), where native populations are simply used as tools for spiritual inspiration and enlightenment. In the words of Sandip Roy, this is about: 'white people discovering themselves in brown places' (2010:online). If we are to fully understand slum tourism as a contemporary phenomenon, it must be theorized through the lens of politics, power, place and race.

## 7. Conclusions

This article presented an empirical study examining Dharavi slum. Through first-hand experience of a slum tour, I observed the restricted, upbeat and positive narrative that was told about the slum as a place of trade and industry, integrated into global supply chains, with a strong community feel. Those attending the tours, as observed in the online reviews, took this up with enthusiasm. The slum was seen as a place of energy and productivity. Slum residents were viewed as industrious and resourceful. A sense of community was seen through smiling children and the lack of hostility. So the tour company and the foreign visitors jointly construct this vision of economic success and social harmony: the tour company through its initial promotion, the tour guides through their buoyant narrative, and the tourists who reiterate, reaffirm and propagate this viewpoint in their retelling.

A key objective of Reality Tours is to address the stigma around slums. The online reviews suggest that this was wholly achieved. From participating in the tour, I can firmly say that it would not be possible to come away with any negative attitudes towards the residents. However, nor should we be left thinking that there isn't a problem. The tour company did such a good job of changing tourists' perceptions that it may be to the detriment of its work. No donations or purchases were made during my visit.<sup>7</sup> This is an obvious and immediate problem, but there is a broader issue. Poverty was not recognized or understood by those on the tour, who appear to be seasoned, western travelers. Life in

the slum was understood as normal and natural. Tourists came away from the experience thinking that the residents lived there by choice, and were happy and financially independent, even wealthy. A positive neoliberal narrative underpinned the tour and the tourists' reviews. However, the broader negative neoliberal context of how slums are created and maintained was absent. Notions of social justice were invisible to the tourists because they didn't feature in the tour. Residents live without any ownership rights to their homes and on land that they have no legal right to. This means that their dwellings and businesses can be demolished or taken away by the authorities at any point, and often are. This is not to mention the lack of access to essential services. Yardley (2011) reports that ten families can share one water tap, with water available for less than three hours a day. Another study of Mumbai's slums (including Dharavi) found that there were significantly higher incidences of water and sanitation-related diseases in slum communities. This is aggravated by their location at environmentally unsafe sites, lack of sewerage and basic sanitation, and poor personal hygiene due to a lack clean water and environmental education (Karn and Harada, 2002). Karnani (2009) claims that there is one public toilet for every 800 people at Dharavi. Dyson (2012) states that this figure is one toilet per 1,440 residents. The lack of facilities leads many people to practice open defecation (Karnani, 2009; Karn and Harada, 2002), which results in the transmission of life-threatening diseases such as typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, dysentery, malaria and tuberculosis. Cramped conditions aid the spread of infection. This results in unhealthy and unsustainable environments. Illness leads to a loss of income, which then contributes to malnutrition, a factor that results in India topping the global chart for chronic malnourishment (Pada, 2010).

By their very nature, slums are illegal settlements. They attract legal and illegal immigrants, refugees, and those on low pay, who are excluded from claiming benefits such as minimum wage compensation, pensions, and health insurance (Riley et al., 2007). Residents experience everyday discrimination when they apply for jobs outside of the slum, try to access schooling beyond Dharavi or attempt to get a bank loan (Yardley, 2011; United Nations, 2013). Slums show an over-presentation of 'schedule castes' (Rukmini, 2013), which is the official name for the lowest caste in India. These are the most socially disadvantaged who are considered 'untouchable' in orthodox Hindu scriptures and practice, and who are condemned to do the society's most unpleasant jobs, like cleaning dry latrines (toilets that don't flush).<sup>8</sup> By decontextualizing slum life, vital factual information is elided. Thus slum tours like this one do not help tourists to understand, talk about or challenge poverty.

It is disturbing, then, to reflect on the comments and reviews posted by the tourists, where the conditions in which people were living were seen to be perfectly acceptable and, in some cases, desirable. When one of the largest slums in Asia is extolled as 'a model for the world', something has gone wrong.<sup>9</sup> Visitors left the slum tour feeling satisfied with their 'authentic' experience, 'transformed' and confident that they had seen the 'real India'. This is in line with other empirical studies of Dharavi (Dyson, 2012; Meschkank, 2011) and accounts of 'neoliberal spiritual tourism' (Williams, 2014:626). From the abundance of phrases such as 'life-changing', 'eye-opening' and 'mind-blowing' in the online analysis, it seems that the slum tours simply empower the wrong people: the privileged, white, western middle classes. In other words,

<sup>8</sup> The caste system could not function without discrimination, yet it is underpinned and reinforced by political, societal and cultural norms around religion. This ensures that people are locked into poverty with no possibility of betterment or escape. See the writings of the late economist and social reformer Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

<sup>9</sup> Prince Charles, heir to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, similarly eulogized Dharavi in his book on sustainable living. He viewed the slum as a place 'that surely holds lessons for modern town planning' (Wales et al., 2010:234). This is a ridiculous and despicable suggestion from someone who embodies privilege, has an annual income of £20 million (Palmer, 2015) and owns a portfolio of land and property worth £728 million (Walker, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> However, this may have been unusual. I do not know whether sales and donations are typically made during the tours or when people return home. The company accounts do not provide this level of detail.



those who are already empowered. Therefore, for all its good intentions, Reality Tours unwittingly undermines its *raison d'être*. This is a tragic irony for a company that aspires to alleviate poverty and that was founded to serve this central purpose. This possibly calls for a harsher judgment of Reality Tours. Jones and Sanyal's account of the Dharavi slum tour (2015) describes how tourists were actively encouraged to interact with the guides but when serious topics such as health and safety, ethnic tensions or workers' rights arose, their questions were ignored, avoided or diverted, and the answers given were impressionistic. They also discussed how tourists were prevented from speaking to locals and discouraged from obtaining counter perspectives, which resulted in very few opportunities to contest what they were being told. This is not accidental but planned and organized. Thus Reality Tours can be seen to directly contribute to the problem, rather than being part of the solution.

This normalization, romanticization, and depoliticization of poverty legitimizes social inequality and diverts attention away from the state and its responsibility for poverty reduction. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine how slum tourism in this case could ever make a meaningful contribution to social change. Iqani's devastating analysis states that even though the tourists' reviews were replete with accounts of their own learning, none of them 'explained how their newfound enlightenment might translate into actions' (2016:82). Similarly, the comments in this research gave no indication of action, as change wasn't deemed necessary. Slum tourism is not a sufficient answer to a growing global problem. At the root of poverty is a terrible social injustice that needs to be 'fought with vicious intolerance' (Verma, 2002: xxiii) by making governments and corporate organizations responsible and accountable. Poverty is caused by the inequitable distribution of resources, which we could end if we simply chose to (Portes, 2016). In the meantime, tour operators could assist visitors in becoming engaged citizens (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt, 2003) by fostering a political literacy. They could help tourists to understand poverty by situating it within a politics of place, and in the context of neoliberalism. Alongside this, academic research could begin theorizing slum tourism, to connect it with political philosophy and poverty studies, and embed it within scholarship on power, race and class.

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