

Me, Myself and I: Western Lifestyle Migrants in Search of Themselves in Varanasi, India

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Abstract

The article investigates Western lifestyle migrants in the city of Varanasi in northern India. Relying on interview material, the author first discusses how the Westerners distinguish themselves from “ordinary” people in their countries of origin. However, in addition to distinguishing themselves from ordinary Westerners, they also define themselves as fundamentally different from “the Indian other”, which becomes very evident in their interview talk. The author argues that the Westerners’ contacts with local Indian people in Varanasi are very limited and Indian people are merely granted the role of the insignificant “other” in the process of the Westerners defining their distinctive identities. The article thus shows that the Westerners define themselves as courageous, independent and active agents both against Indian and Western others. The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi also share a discourse of having found their true selves in India and have changed fundamentally during their time there. The author eventually argues that although the Westerners articulate their stay in India as a quest for a better life, eventually staying in India seems to become a trip to the self and for the self.

Keywords: lifestyle migration, Otherness, Varanasi

Introduction

“I feel more true here.” (Anton, 32)

This is how many Westerners in the city of Varanasi, India reply to the question of why they prefer living in India compared to their countries of origin. In other words, they claim to have found their true selves in India. In this article, I elaborate on the statement: what is the true self that they are talking about? I argue that the Westerners in Varanasi define themselves against the ‘ordinary’ citizens of their home countries but also against the ‘Indian other’, as a consequence of which being in India becomes a process of defining one’s distinctive self.

Backpackers and Lifestyle Migrants in India

India was already a popular travel destination in the colonial era (see, Ghose, 1998a, 1998b; Mohanty, 2003), and in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it became a popular backpacking destination among hippies (see, Alderson, 1971; Hall, 1968; MacLean, 2006; Mehta, 1979; Odzer, 1995; Saldanha, 2007, p. 29; Tomory, 1996; Wiles, 1972). Thousands of backpackers still tour India every year (see Hottola, 1999; Hutnyk, 1996; Maoz, 2005; Wilson, 1997). India attracts backpackers above all because of its ‘exoticism’ and cheapness. The backpacking infrastructure is well developed and there are numerous cheap hotels and Western restaurants in all the popular travel destinations. In addition, one can reach almost anywhere by inexpensive public transportation and English is widely spoken. However, despite these advantages, backpackers often understand a visit to India more as a duty and a challenge than a pleasurable experience due to the fact that India also represents poverty, filth and illness (see Wilson, 1997, p. 55).

After their trip, most backpackers return to their home countries to continue their lives there. Some, however, enjoy India so much that they go to their countries of origin — or other Western countries — only in order to earn money, and they end up returning to India again and again. Instead of continuing backpacking, they often settle down in certain locations in India. For them, the stage that was supposed to be a temporary phase becomes a lot longer than initially planned, and the backpacking experience results in a lifestyle in which they spend long periods of time in India where they claim to have found a better life. This article focuses on a group of such people in the city of Varanasi in northern India. Most of the people featuring here were once backpackers and now repeatedly return to Varanasi and as a consequence I define them as lifestyle migrants.

Lifestyle migration refers to a phenomenon where (middle class) citizens of affluent industrialized countries move abroad in order to find a more meaningful and relaxed life (see Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). Very often, such migration means moving from affluent countries to less affluent ones where living costs are cheaper and the climate is pleasant. For example, British, German, and Scandinavian people move to Spain, some Brits also move to rural France and some Americans move to Central America. In short, lifestyle migration is motivated by a quest for a 'better quality' of life. The choice of living abroad is typically conceptualized as an escape from the hectic, consumer-oriented lifestyles and the 'rat race'. According to Michaela Benson, many lifestyle migrants move because of diminishing income opportunities, for example when they lose their jobs; some others escape pressurized working environments and retired lifestyle migrants often claim that old people are not valued in their societies of origin, whereas in the destinations they can grow old with dignity and continue to be active (Benson, 2007, pp.13-15). Additional contributing factors for lifestyle migration are that income levels have increased in the affluent industrialized countries in recent decades and an increasing number of people have experience in living abroad (Williams & King & Warners & Patterson, 2000, p. 31).

In lifestyle migration, the boundaries between migration and tourism are blurred. In fact, many scholars nowadays place tourism and migration on the same continuum, where it is difficult to distinguish between temporary and permanent moves (see Bell & Ward, 2000, p. 88; Gustafson, 2002, p.104, p. 899; O'Reilly, 2003, p. 301). The main difference between lifestyle migrants and tourists is that tourists are in a temporary situation, planning to return to their home countries within a specific time period, whereas lifestyle migrants do not have such plans – or even desire to return.

Although this article focuses on Varanasi, it is by no means the only location in India that attracts Western lifestyle migrants. There are in fact various popular places, all of which attract Westerners for different reasons. The beaches of the states of Goa and Kerala are the most well-known (see, D'Andrea, 2007; Saldanha, 2007; Wilson, 1997). In addition to its beautiful beaches, Goa is also famous for its *techno* music parties and a wide variety of drugs. Moreover, various locations on the Himalaya mountains are popular: Dharamsala attracts those interested in Tibetan Buddhism, being the home of the *Dalai Lama* and thousands of Tibetan refugees, and some other locations in the mountains, for example Manali, attract those interested in smoking hash. Those interested in spiritual matters gather for example to Poona near Mumbai, Auroville in southern India or Rishikesh in northern India. In Poona, there is the famous Osho International meditation resort, Auroville is 'the universal town' for all humanity, and Rishikesh is famous for its numerous yoga and meditation courses. The places that are popular among Westerners in India are usually villages or towns; the big Indian cities do not attract Western lifestyle migrants with maybe the exception of Kolkata which attracts students of Indian classical music as well as those interested in voluntary charity work in the Mother Teresa organisation.

Westerners in Varanasi

This article is based on the anthropological research conducted among Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi over thirteen months in 2002-2003. Varanasi, one of the oldest living cities in the world, is a holy city of Hinduism with over a million inhabitants, situated on the banks of the river Ganges. Hindus believe Varanasi to be the home of the supreme god Shiva and it is an important pilgrimage centre. Diane Eck, an indologist, writes that 'it is precisely because Banaras [Varanasi] has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India that Western visitors have often found this city the most strikingly

“foreign” of India’s cities’ (Eck, 1983, p. 9). For many Westerners, Varanasi indeed represents a sign of Eastern otherness. However, most of the Western lifestyle migrants are not there because of being attracted to Hinduism but because of their interest in classical Indian music. Varanasi is a centre of music in India and some of the most famous Indian musicians, for example Ravi Shankar and Bishmillah Khan, have lived there.

The Westerners in Varanasi come from Europe, Israel, Canada and Australia amounting to 200-300 during the popular season that starts in October and ends in May¹. Most of them are of middle class origin. In Varanasi, the Westerners live in the same houses year after year and have all the necessary household utensils there. For many, the lifestyle has lasted for years, even decades. Typically, the Westerners work for a few months in menial jobs or sell Indian textiles and handicrafts in markets and festivals in their countries of origin and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. Most of them are twenty to thirty-five years old but some are forty to fifty, with men forming the majority. In Varanasi, they all live in one particular area within walking distance of each other, renting apartments in local houses. Most Westerners in Varanasi play Indian instruments and some do yoga, meditation or charity work. A lot of time is spent socializing with friends, and they end up forming a tight, yet temporary, community there (see Korpela, 2009).

The community of Westerners in Varanasi mainly functions in (grammatically poor) English mixed with common Hindi expressions. I refer to these people as ‘Westerners’ due to the fact that in Varanasi differences between various Western nationalities seem to disappear when opposed with the ‘Indian other’. The Westerners

¹ The summer months are extremely hot and wet.

understand this ‘Westernity’ to mean above all a certain kind of education, knowledge of certain popular cultures and appreciation of certain values; especially individuality and freedom. ‘The West’ becomes unified also in their everyday lives in Varanasi. An everyday example in which the common Western identity becomes manifested is food. When the Westerners cook together, the most popular dish is pasta, and it is understood as a common Western dish (instead of representing Italian cuisine). When food and other goods or values are defined as ‘Western’, the crucial factor is classifying them as ‘non-Indian’. Moreover, when they explain their lifestyle choice they often criticize the ‘West’ instead of criticizing merely their specific countries of origin.

My study was ethnographic and the methods used were participant observation and interviews. While in Varanasi, I participated in the everyday activities of the Westerners and kept a detailed field diary of my participant observation. The very intense social life of the Westerners includes parties and concerts as well as frequent visits, cooking, eating and hanging out together. In addition to participant observation, I interviewed 44 Westerners who were staying in Varanasi for at least two months (most for longer) and who had also been there for long periods before. The focus of this article is on how the Westerners in Varanasi define their self-identities.

Defining the Self Against the Western Other

A lot [of people] are not happy. They listen to me saying, maybe I'll go to India for three months, and they say "oh, I wish to go, ah, you are lucky" and blaah blaah but "hallo Bombay, *calo*² Bombay" I say, "no, come on". They prefer one newspaper, one big sofa, putting their legs up, watching TV until bedtime, sex once a week after the news of the night, Friday...Because the day after you do not work, so you can sleep a little bit more and you can enjoy half an hour more... yeah, it is like this for a lot of people. (Anton, 32)³

² *Calo*: Let's go.

³ The interviews were conducted in English, which is not the mother tongue of most of the interviewees. In this article, I have corrected only the most obvious language mistakes in their speech patterns. After each interview quotation, I have marked a pseudonym and the person's correct age at the time of the interview. *RASAALA*, Vol. 1 No.1, 53 - 73

I get this overwhelming feeling in my country of origin that people are [...] doing a prison sentence: They are in, they got this amount of time they gotta do. They are just trying to get through this the best they can [...] It's all about making the time pass. (Jamie, 26)

Q: Are you different from people in your country of origin?

A: I think yes, I'm totally different. [...] At least I do something interesting for me. I meet different people. (Marco, 34)

My interviewees often claimed that people in the West are unhappy without realizing it. They considered themselves very lucky to have left behind the boring and meaningless life in their countries of origin. India had offered them a chance to search for something different, and better. Many of my interviewees defined themselves as courageous and independent in comparison to people who had stayed in their countries of origin. When talking about lifestyle choices, they held a very individualistic view.

Q: What do you think people in your country of origin think about your lifestyle?

A: [...] I think everybody can have this lifestyle if they want it. You want it, you can do it. The only thing is you might have to make some money first. (Ivan, 45)

In my interviewees' understanding, the possibility of and responsibility for having an interesting and meaningful life lies with each individual. By using such a discourse, they ended up defining themselves as active agents in opposition to passive people who blindly follow routines 'in the prison', and in their case it was not only a matter of words but also of actual practices.

Most of my interviewees claimed that leaving their countries of origin had helped them to realize their true selves, and many also seem to have become empowered in the process, that is, they emphasized acting as individual agents.

Q: Do you feel you have changed in India?

A: Yes, a lot.

Q: How?

A: When I was child, I thought I have to do what everybody does [...] Everybody has a job, everybody gets married, everybody gets a career...But when I started to live here, I realized that it's best when I do what I want. I should do what I want. (Naima, 31)

[Ivan is telling his life story]

I was really sort of unsatisfied with that life, I felt trapped but I didn't know what to do and then, the opportunity for travelling came up, and I knew this was, I had to learn about myself, to find out what makes me happy. (Ivan, 45)

As the above quotations show, the goal is happiness and individual satisfaction: it is all about the self. At the same time, the emphasis on individualism allows them a positive self-definition as active agents: they have done something – they have moved abroad – to improve their lives.

It is remarkable that the Westerners in Varanasi have gone to India to find their true selves and to realize their individuality. Indian cultures are usually not characterized in individualistic terms but quite the opposite: in orientalist discourse, India represents collective values whereas the West is described in terms of individualism (see, Goody, 1996, p. 246; Turner, 1994, p. 54; van der Veer, 1993, p. 37). As outsiders — far away from home and commitments there — the Westerners in Varanasi are able to gain freedom: because they do not belong to the local social networks, commitments and expectations there, they are free to pursue individual happiness. Locals are definitely not free in the same sense in Varanasi. Therefore, when the Westerners realize their own individuality in India, it is actually not Indian culture that has made them free but their outsider status, and by no means are they aiming to 'go native' in India, that is to become like Indian people are.

Defining the Self Against the Indian Other

Q: Do you feel different from Indian women?

A: [...] For me, Indian people are children, they are big children for sure [...] because they don't have responsibilities at all. Not at all. Even when they grow up, always you have your parents giving you money or looking at what you want to do, what you want, and it's not like 'ok, mom, dad, I take my luggage and I *calo*⁴, I go'. (Donna, 28)

Q: Do you feel you are different from Indian men?

A: In a way yes.

Q: How?

⁴ *Calo*: 'Go' or 'Let's go'. It is an imperative form of *calnaa* (to go) but the Westerners often, wrongly, use it to mean 'I go' or 'I leave'.

A: I've got aspirations, I aspire. A lot of Indian men, they take life as it is. They say [...] Right now I'm like this and this will never change. And a lot of them are very self-defeating in a way because [...] I often get from Indian people a sense of giving up and a feeling of not being able to change a certain situation. It might look very, very, very calm [...] but I think that Indian society is very structured and for a person not to feel completely at home in this situation is terrible, because they can't get out as easily as I can. I have, yeah, I'm different because I'm more free. (David, 28)

When I asked my interviewees about differences between themselves and Indian people, most of them characterized Indians in negative and simplified terms. In both quotations above, independence and free will become distinguishing markers against Indians: culture prevents Indians from being independent whereas Western cultures and the Western selves of my interviewees become defined as highly individualistic.

I asked my interviewees whether they feel different from Indian men and women and the answers usually contained long reflections on fundamental differences. Usually those answers tell more about the Westerners themselves than they tell about Indians. Whether it was Western men defining themselves vis-à-vis Indian men or Western women defining themselves vis-à-vis Indian women, 'Indians' were understood as one and differences regarding, for example, class or age were usually ignored. Indians are merely granted the role of the insignificant 'other'. In this process, the Westerners place themselves in a position of judgement from where they are able to see 'the Indian other' against which they present themselves as active agents responsible for their own decisions and actions. One can even see traces of racism in the Westerners' views although they themselves would most likely argue the opposite if asked.

Self-definition plays a part also in the following quotation from a Western man.

Q: Are you different from Indian men? [...]

A: [...] They are lazy.

Q: Indians are lazy?

A: Indians are lazy, it's a big difference. If you don't say [anything], they don't do nothing. So that's a big difference and they have no [...] responsibility, I think, they don't have so much responsibility. [...] They don't care, I think. (Patrick, 21)

Patrick's comment is very interesting because laziness and irresponsibility are accusations that these Westerners often face themselves. They meet such criticism in their countries of origin, where they are often accused of being parasites who enjoy an easy life without working. Moreover, locals in Varanasi often see the Western lifestyle migrants as lazy. Yet, the Westerners themselves do not view themselves as lazy: they claim to simply concentrate on doing things that they enjoy, for example studying Indian classical music.

In the case of the Western women, defining the self against the 'Indian other' is even more significant than it is for the Western men: many Western women in Varanasi define themselves as strong, free, independent and progressive, in opposition to unfree, dependent and oppressed Indian woman (see Korpela, 2006; compare with Mohanty, 1991). In addition to distinguishing themselves from Indian women in their talk, the Western women distinguish themselves also via their clothing as even when they use local clothing, they use it differently from local women.

Q: Do you feel you are different from Indian women?

A: ...Yes.

Q: How?

A: Because Indian women, they accept not being free. They feel normal not to be free, just being at home, not going outside ...For me, it's very different, I have a very different spirit. (Sylvia, 38)

I wouldn't like to be Indian, Indian girl. [...] They are not so free as we are in Europe. We, I am used to this freedom. I cannot imagine being Indian but I don't think they have a problem with this because they stay at home but they don't mind, they have no idea about going away [it does not come to their mind to leave]. (Sara, 32)

Sara's comment implies that if Indian women knew about the possibilities for freedom, they would like to have them too, that is, they would like to be as Western women are. This is obviously a very ethnocentric and evolutionist view but it is very common among the Westerners in Varanasi. Such comments also suggest that although in some respects, the Westerners criticize 'the West', in other respects they appreciate it.

Usually, my interviewees saw Indian women as one. Some acknowledged regional differences⁵ but none acknowledged class differences. Above all, many Westerners in Varanasi see Indian women as housewives, and such comments are clearly a part of the Western women defining themselves as essentially different, that is, as active and independent. The Western men share the view of Indian women as a homogenous group.

The whole life, they [Indian women] more or less stay at home. They don't even want to leave home. Taking care of the family, cooking. Many times even passing the day, just all day you can relax, all day stay in the house and enjoy. Usually Western people cannot do this, if you tell them just the day in the house with nothing to do, they would go crazy. (Noel, 31)

Noel seemed to have a rather unrealistic view of housework. I first thought that the comment is gender-related, that is, it is a typical male view but I was wrong: I heard a Western woman once explaining that Indian babies do not use diapers because the mothers do not have anything else to do except taking care of their babies whereas Western women are busy with other things and therefore, do not have time to clean after a diaper-free baby. Not all the Westerners in Varanasi share this view of Indian housewives living a life of leisure but it nevertheless exists among them, and it is used to define the Western women as active, independent agents.

In this section, it has become evident that the Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi talk about Indian men and women in very simplistic terms. Here, one may start to wonder how it is possible that such views prevail.

Indian Friends: A Contradiction in Terms

The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi live in local neighbourhoods, renting apartments from local families. Consequently, the Westerners cannot avoid contact with

⁵ An example of acknowledged regional differences that the Westerners often mention is that women in the mountains (north) or in Kerala (south) are more independent than women in Varanasi.

local Indian people. One of my interviewees blamed some Westerners for not knowing their Indian neighbours even when they had lived in Varanasi for years. The same interviewee, however, admitted that he himself did not have Indian friends. Having local friends turned out to be a problematic issue for almost all my interviewees.

Q: Do you have Indian friends?

A: Good question! (laughs) Very good question, yeah. It depends on the definition of a friend. [...] not, really no. And this is funny because the first time I went [back to Europe], a lot of my friends asked me ‘but you are still in contact with Indian friends there. You continue to write or phone or whatever’ and I was thinking suddenly that I don’t have Indian friends really. (Donna, 28)

The Westerners’ relationships with locals in Varanasi are usually instrumental: their Indian acquaintances are landlords, shopkeepers or music teachers. In other words, there is a service connection. Most of my interviewees say that they do not have any Indian friends. Some have local friends but even they usually say that they do not share their lives with them the same way as they do with their Western friends. When my interviewees explained the lack of local friends, they referred to cultural differences that they consider to be fundamental. Rather many of my interviewees mentioned that the Indian conception of friendship is very different from the Western one. They are thus referring to culturally bound ways of making friends and eventually suggesting that cross-cultural friendships are a contradiction in terms.

Q: Do you feel different from Indian people?

A: [...] We [Westerners] want to make friendship and they [Indians] want money. (laughs) Maybe it’s the main difference. (Sara, 32)

A reoccurring complaint among the Westerners in Varanasi is the belief that Indian people consider all Westerners rich and they always try to benefit from Westerners economically. This irritates many. ‘I am not a bank’ said a Western man to an Indian acquaintance who was asking for money from him. Many Westerners acknowledge the

structural causes behind such behaviour but are determined to avoid any unpleasant consequences for themselves. Many of the Westerners occasionally give money or goods to beggars and other poor people but they do not like to be asked, that is, they do not like to be put in the position of a patron.

Obviously the lack of language proficiency is an obstacle for getting to know locals: most Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi know very little, if any, Hindi and many locals do not speak English. On the other hand, a few of my interviewees also mentioned that those locals who speak good English are usually very 'modern' and 'Westernized', thus they do not understand why the Westerners are so enthusiastic about Indian traditions. Here, the difference is not understood in terms of India versus the West but in terms of 'modern' middle class values versus a counterculture that idealizes ancient 'authentic' India. In fact, the English-speaking middle class of Varanasi may have more in common with middle classes in the West than they do with the Westerners who are searching for the 'simple' and 'authentic' life in Varanasi (for the viewpoint of modern Indian men and for the difficulty of applying the term middle class in Indian context, see Favero, 2005). It may also be that having a different educational background contributes to the Westerners' dislike of middle class Indians as many of them have rather little formal education, and they typically claim not to value such education. The Westerners, however, do not usually recognize themselves as being less educated than many (middle or upper class) Indians but instead often refer to uneducated Indians with whom, in their view, deep discussions are impossible.

Q: Which things do you appreciate and which are problematic [in India]?

A: It's very rare, the conversation I could have with Westerners, I could have with Indians. More or less, they won't have the ability to understand what I try to express and [what] I have an interest in. I received [got an] education. (Marcel, 31)

In the above quotation, Marcel characterizes Indians as a homogeneous uneducated bloc, unable to understand Westerners. Such a view easily results in a lack of contacts with Indians as a consequence of which, stereotypical views prevail. In my understanding, the Westerners' stereotypical views on essential cultural differences between themselves and Indians function as tools in their self-definition: they define themselves as fundamentally different from Indians. Consequently, they need to keep social distance from local people because closer contacts would probably question their self-definition as fundamentally different from locals.

The New Self: India as a Turning Point

For the Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi being in India is not merely a question of defining the self but also a moment of a changing self. Most of my interviewees claimed to have changed fundamentally in India.

Q: You said you have changed here a lot yourself [...] What has [happened], how has India affected you?

A: I cannot imagine my life without coming to India. It is really true. I don't even remember who I was before I came [...]t the change that I went through in India was so strong, I don't even remember what was before, it sounds like a vague dream. It happened [to] somebody else. (Rafael, 40)

Seeing India as a turning point in one's life is obviously a realisation that has come afterwards. In the interviews, my questions contributed to such a discourse since I specifically asked whether the interviewee felt s/he had changed in India. However, the Westerners in Varanasi often talk in such terms also outside the interview context. A few Westerners have also ended up adopting an Indian name⁶. Adopting a new first name illustrates well a change of identity. Very often, the Westerners in Varanasi used the talk about the changing self also to justify their stay in India as the change was always understood in positive terms.

⁶ The Indian names that they adopt usually carry a Hindu or Buddhist spiritual meaning or a meaning connected with nature.

Q: How is your life different in India from your country of origin?

A: [...] After India my life changed.

Q: How has India changed you?

A: ...More relaxed... and more, I feel more happy, happier and relaxed. (Maya, 31)

Most of my interviewees said that India had made them more relaxed and content. In making such comments, they implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, criticized Western societies where people are nervous and worried.

However, being in India is not only (or necessarily) about a changing self but also about realizing one's true self. A commonly shared view among the Westerners in Varanasi is that there is a core self to be realized and knowing one's true self does not come automatically. The ethos is that one has to learn to be one's true self and one has to learn to be free. All in all, the emphasis is on the self.

India is in fact a very particular place to search for oneself. Started by theosophists and adopted by the *gurus*⁷ of the hippies, ancient meditation and yoga techniques have been developed to meet the needs of Westerners who are searching for themselves. In fact, India has been rather successful in capitalising on its image as a home of spiritual wisdom (Bandyopadhyay and Morais, 2005) and such a view was adopted also by Indian nationalists in order to create national consciousness and pride (Edwardes, 1967, p. 39; see also Fox, 1992; Ludden, 1993; van der Veer, 1993). In addition to a conscious search for the self, most of my interviewees claimed that one is bound to change in India even without spiritual searching.

I think... if you are receptive to Indian culture, Indian culture will change you in some ways definitely. It has to, it's such a strong culture. I would say that you're gonna have to change if you spend some time here in India. (Marcel, 31)

⁷ *Guru*: a (spiritual) teacher or guide.

A significant factor is obviously that one is forced to redefine oneself when one encounters the 'Indian other'. A few of my interviewees also mentioned that India offers a possibility for a new beginning, an opportunity to create a new self as one can leave old expectations and roles behind.

Q: Why do you not want to live in Europe?

A: [...] Here you can invent yourself, you can create yourself. You come here, nobody knows you, you can put the best of your behaviour [forward], you put the best of your character. [...] And nobody doubts what you are. You can create your own story in this country, you are free for this. Sure if you don't follow [act according to] your words, I mean if your actions don't follow your words, also very quickly you see here, you can collapse very quickly also in India. [...] Here it's to do a lot with your, always working on yourself and always working on your character. (Olga, 48)

Olga's comment indicates a kind of a game with the self, yet, at the same time she is referring to the concept of a 'true' self when she mentions working on one's character. All in all, the Westerners in Varanasi often defined a trip to India as a trip to oneself, and although they often articulated their stay in India in terms of criticism towards the West, it was also very much a question of finding and defining the self – both against the 'ordinary Western other' and the 'Indian other'.

Self at the Centre

When defining themselves against Indians, the Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi define independence as a 'Western' characteristic and emphasize having made an individual lifestyle choice. However, when defining themselves against 'ordinary' Westerners, many claim that those who have stayed in their countries of origin are trapped in 'prison', that is, they are not independent but follow empty routines without being true to themselves. Therefore, it seems above all to be a question of the Westerners in Varanasi defining themselves as independent; both in comparison to Indian people and to people in their countries of origin, and the Western and Indian others against which they define themselves are understood in very homogenous, simplified, terms.

This article has thus shown that being in India is a very individualistic project for the Westerners in Varanasi: my interviewees talked much about finding, defining and changing the self. The emphasis on the self is typical for our era. According to Anthony Giddens, the self is often seen as a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible. 'We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). In other words, the self has become a project that needs to be developed and reflected upon. Moreover, Giddens writes that 'in modern conditions, we live as though we are surrounded by mirrors from which we reflect ourselves' (Giddens, 1991, p. 172), and in this world of various possibilities, it is important to have a coherent, true, self that works as a reference point (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). The situation of the Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi fits well Giddens's statements: to a large extent, being in India seems to be a question of defining the self and the Westerners, who are living in a situation of various possibilities, reflect their true selves against both Indian and Western others.

The transnational context of lifestyle migrants adds a new twist to Giddens's idea of a reflexive self. The issue of finding oneself through travelling is widely discussed in travel research (see Bruner, 1991; Desforges, 2000; Elsrud, 2001; Harrison, 2006; Noy, 2004; Wang, 1999). Thus the Westerners in Varanasi are not distinct in this sense. Yet, they are different from tourists and travellers in the sense that they have chosen to stay in India repeatedly for very long periods. For example, travellers often aim to use at home the cultural capital (often materialized as a distinctive self) that they have gained during their travels (Desforges, 2000, p. 938). Lifestyle migrants, however, do not permanently return 'home'. In fact, realizing the self that the Westerners in Varanasi have found seems to require recurring sojourns in India: many of my interviewees considered it difficult to

maintain their true selves in the West when they went back. Many said that after spending some time in the West, they have to return to India in order to be able to live as their true selves. Nevertheless, either here or there, the self is at the centre.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi define themselves as courageous, independent and active agents both against Indian and Western others. Although they articulate their stay in India as a quest for a better life, eventually staying in India seems to become a trip to the self and for the self. I have also argued that the self is a reflexive project for the Westerners in Varanasi, and the transnational conditions make their emphasis on the reflexive self particular.

I started this article with an interview quotation where the interviewee stated to feel 'more true' in India. The fact that an interviewee replies by such comment when asked why he prefers India to his country of origin indicates how central defining the self is for the Westerners in Varanasi. To put it simply, it seems that although the Westerners initially went to India in order to find India and a better life there, they have ended up finding their distinctive Western selves instead. In other words, lifestyle migration to India provides the Westerners a setting for realizing their 'true' – independent and individualistic – Western selves.

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