SOMEWHAT EMPTY MEETING GROUNDS – TRAVELER-HOST INTERACTION IN MUNNAR, INDIA

Prof. Petri Hottola, Department of Geography, University of Oulu, petri.hottola@oulu.fi

Keywords: Independent travel, visitor, host, spatiotemporal, India.

Meeting the authentic locals has been stated to be one of the ‘pillars’ of the ideology of independent travel, and a feature which differentiates it from conventional tourism. The enclave nature of independent travel does, however, raise questions. If travelers prefer to travel from metaspatial bubbles to bubbles, could the empirical reality of their interactions also be more touristic than has been previously assumed?

The results of a time-space budgeting survey, among 30 international travelers visiting Munnar, a hill station in Kerala, seem to confirm the hypothesis. The survey was made on two 24-hour days, one travel and one leisure day, with fifteen minute accuracy. The travelers spent 48% of their active hours (AH), on average 8 h 35 min of sleep excluded, without interaction with other people, except their spouse, if available. A total of 22% of the AH was spent with other travelers, with 13% of the people completely avoiding them. Local service providers and interaction with them consisted 38% of the AH, whereas ‘genuine’ encounters with locals received a mere 5% share. In other words, most of the interaction with locals was instrumental, geared to obtain goods and services or to get practical support in travel situations.

The numbers add to more than one hundred percent because it is possible to simultaneously interact with more than one category of people. For example on a Kerala cooking course, one interacts both with the local instructor and fellow course attendants (other travelers).

The material revealed a number of interesting temporalities and differences between travel and stationary days. As an example, travelers had most of their ‘genuine’ contacts with the locals while on transit between enclaves, on trains for example, where they were situationally ‘forced’ to interact. On leisure days, with maximum freedom to look for these interactions, they chose otherwise, focusing on the more immediately gratifying services, reversal or fellow foreigners. The travelers preferred the superficial, regulated encounters. Furthermore, on travel days, the peak of consumption occurred on late afternoons, before an early rest. On leisure days, consumption of
tourism goods and services peaked in the morning and around noon, the afternoon being reserved for rest and solitary activities such as walks in forests and tea plantations.

All in all, the spatiotemporalities and quality of interaction in Munnar raise an uncomfortable question: Is there any significant difference left between today’s independent travel and the so called conventional tourism? The first one has become institutionalized and the later has become more self-initiated. Do they already overlap one another?