

Slum Tourism: Promoting Participatory Development or Abusing Poverty for Profit?

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ABSTRACT The concept of “slum tourism” has been around since the time the rich wanted to experience life in the “deprived” and “risqué” spaces occupied by the marginalised communities of late-19th-century London.¹ Today it is a profitable business, bringing more than a million tourists every year to informal settlements in various cities across the world.² Proponents of the industry say that slum tourism creates discourse that could result in positive change, and that the profits help the local slum communities. Critics argue that the tours are intrinsically exploitative. This brief takes stock of some of the most well-established slum tours in different parts of the world, evaluates the genesis of the industry and, using Mumbai’s Dharavi as a case study, probes its current relevance.

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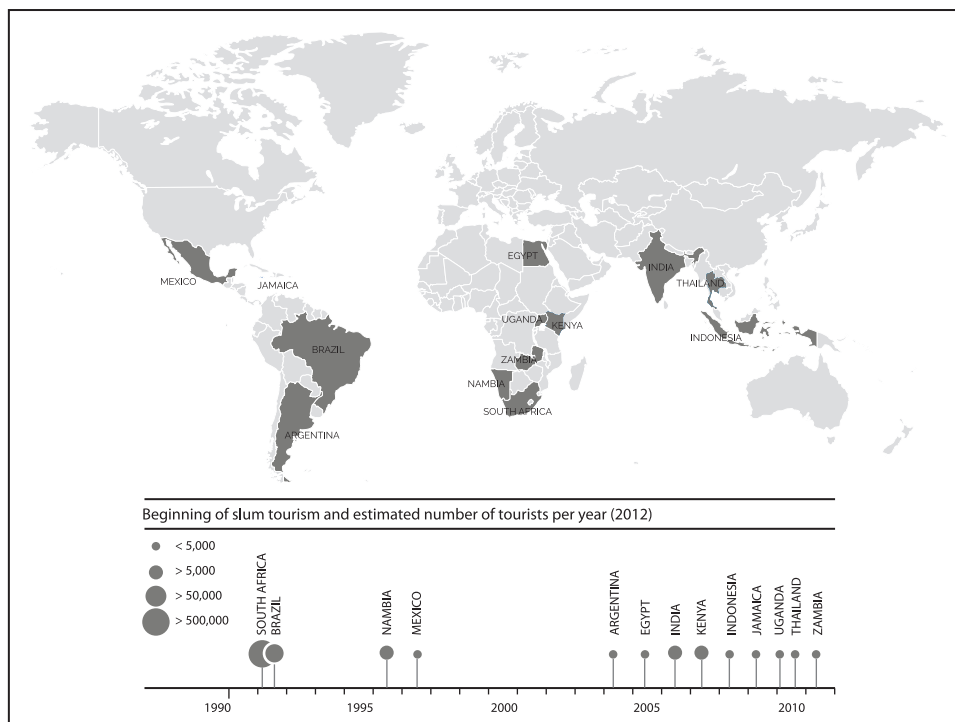
INTRODUCTION

Typing in “slum tours” on the popular travel website, *Tripadvisor*, will lead to pictures of smiling, well-dressed foreign tourists, their arms around locals, with derelict slums in the background. “Slum tours”, as a concept, can be traced to the act called “slumming” in the 1860s; “slumming” itself was a word added to the Oxford Dictionary at the time, meaning “to go into, or frequent, slums for discreditable purposes; to saunter about, with a suspicion, perhaps, of immoral pursuits.”³ Slumming became a routine activity when rich Londoners braved the city’s notorious East End in the late 19th century. They left their elegant homes and clubs in Mayfair and Belgravia – still London’s most upmarket neighbourhoods until today – and crowded onto horse-drawn omnibuses bound for midnight tours of the slums of East London.⁴

More than a century later, the practice was brought to New York City as a form of amusement to compare slums abroad, giving birth to the designated touring practices through the non-white section of Harlem.⁵ Oxford and Cambridge Universities also started using the concept to understand underprivileged neighbourhoods and inform 19th-century social development policy by witnessing first-hand the lives of people living in those areas.⁶

The Oxford dictionary has since revised its definition of slumming to mean, “to spend time at a lower social level than one’s own through curiosity or for charitable purposes”— which might aptly describe the current phenomenon of “slum tourism” in different parts of the world. Today, it is estimated that one million

Figure 1. Expansion of Slum Tourism



Source: Fabian Frenzel, Ko Koens, Malte Steinbrink, Christian Rogerson, “Slum Tourism: State of the Art,” *Tourism Review International* Vol. 18 (2015)

people go on slum tours every year.⁷ This number is remarkable enough, even if compared with the big number of 300 million tourists who visited religious sites in 2017.⁸ Eight out of every 10 of these tourists go to either the shanty towns of Cape Town or the *favelas*[#] of Rio de Janeiro.⁹ To be sure, tourism is an ever-evolving commercial activity that continuously looks for novelty in destinations.¹⁰ This nature lends tourism to a variety of genres of interest, depending on the assortment of sites and experiences offered by particular destinations. In a time of globalised experiences, however, the novelty factor in travelling tends to get muted more easily, and the demand for more unique forms of travel increases: among them, adventure tourism, reality tours, artisanal tours, and poverty tours. These are called “niche travel” in tourism parlance. Slum tourism itself has grown into a well-organised, global industry, with over 300,000 visitors touring slums in Cape Town in 2007 and 40,000 tourists exploring the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in 2009.¹¹

The contemporary wave of slum tourism started in South Africa and Brazil in the 1990s, and it has now expanded to several cities, as seen in Figure 1. Tours of the South African townships were first conducted in the 1990s by local residents to help raise global awareness about the rampant human rights violations in their marginalised and racially segregated areas. Meanwhile, in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and landfills of Tondo in the Philippines, tours are conducted not by the community people but by outsiders who work with local guides. Whether in Cape Town

or Tondo, however, these tours purport to have the same aim of offering the experience of “real-life surroundings” to visitors.¹²

A 2010 research paper on slum tourism in Mumbai found that most people embark on slum tours because they are interested in that culture, and they want to learn about the living conditions of the residents of those communities.¹³ Herein lies the inherent paradox in slum tourism: while its supposed objective is to increase awareness about the lives of the poor, it also attempts to show tourists the positive aspects of those very same lives. In these tours, slums are ingeniously described as places meant for the experience of reality, where the focus is not on the squalor and poverty of the residents but on the presentation of “positive socio-economic development impulses and alternative forms of development that defy normal approaches”.¹⁴ This creates a dissonance between the *intent* and *effect* of slum tourism – while it is meant to create awareness, it invariably ends up glossing over the unfortunate facets of poverty and adversity, much less their structural causes.

Existing scholarly work on the subject focuses on whether this form of tourism engenders positive socio-economic impact. As elaborated by Frenzel, “slum tourism promoters, tour providers as well as tourists claim that this form of tourism contributes to development in slums by creating a variety of potential sources of income and other non-material benefits.”¹⁵ The question, however, is how far in fact do tourists come to an understanding of local problems, or whether

A favela is a Brazilian Portuguese term to describe an urban area of slums, shantytown, or shacks.

they indeed engage in any actions, post-tour, to affect concrete change. Slum tourism also raises ethical issues: do these tours end up merely objectifying the poor, and do these visits not violate the people's privacy, to begin with?

SLUM TOURISM: DIMENSIONS AND FORMS

Following the end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, the country saw a significant increase in the number of international arrivals from 3.6 million in 1994 to 9.1 million in 2002. In that period, the tourism sector outshined the historically lucrative gold-mining sector in revenues.¹⁶ Tourism in post-apartheid South Africa started off as a niche form of tourism for politically interested travellers who wanted to visit the South Western Townships (or Soweto), which were the centre of political repression during the anti-apartheid struggle.¹⁷ Since then, tour destinations in the country have expanded along the same theme, trying to engage tourists with the urban residents of areas that were formerly classified as “non-white” and planned according to the old regime's championship of racial segregation.

Today most of the slum tourists who visit South Africa are from Britain, Germany, Netherlands and the US.¹⁸ Organisers say that these slum tours can be a direct way of raising awareness about the debilitating effects of policy-level racial segregation. Such awareness, in turn, could lead to changes in the cognisance and attitudes of the tourists towards issues of racism affecting migrants in their own countries. The result of these tours, therefore, may be different from those in Mumbai, Rio, or

Manila—there is potential for these tourists to learn certain lessons from the tour and contribute positively to their home country, as opposed to ending their engagement with the tour itself. However, most other slum tours – for example, in Mumbai – are not based on a narrative of historical discrimination, but merely highlight the current problems of inequality and poverty and are touted to help lead to solutions. In both South Africa and Brazil, unlike in India, policy has played a key role in the expansion of slum tourism. Policymakers have promoted, for example, locations of the anti-apartheid struggle by creating museums and sites of political heritage in cities like Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. Rio de Janeiro, for its part, has developed plans for museums of the favela region.¹⁹ Sports has also played a part in promoting slum tourism in both Brazil and South Africa. The FIFA World Cup, which both countries have hosted, involved tours where football was at the centrestage of the experience. Those tours happened to be in the poorer sections of society.

Due to high-level policy interventions, local involvement in tours in both these countries is limited. This is not the case with the slum tours in Mumbai. According to the research by Frenzel et al (2015), “in practicality all major slum tourism destinations the most popular tours are run by tour operators, NGOs, or guides who are based outside the slums.”²⁰ Some of the earliest tours in South Africa were operated by local residents, but they have now been displaced by the more professional tour operators, many of them under external ownership (i.e., white).²¹ Therefore, even as there could potentially be an increase in awareness, the lack of local participation negates the argument that slum

tourism benefits the society that is being “experienced”. Freire-Medeiros, in an extensive research of Rio’s favelas, further points to significant levels of economic leakage occurring in slum tourism and recommends that visitors be made aware of what portions of the profit of slum tours actually goes back into local communities.²² A study of the residents’ reactions by Frenzel et al. shows that these tours “challenge negative perspectives, breaks the isolation of citizens, and [engenders] a sense of pride that foreign tourists are interested”²³ in their lives. At the same time, the research also mentions that few residents mention direct economic gain or employment as benefits of these tours; therefore, whatever positive results that are obtained are insubstantial and short-term.

THE CASE OF DHARAVI

The Dharavi area of Mumbai is the second-largest slum in Asia, and the third-largest in the world. Dharavi is not a desolate and deprived community of unemployed squatters. Within the congested alleys of shanties there are booming home industries that sustain 20,000 small-scale units.²⁴

A *New York Times* mapping of the industrial slum area describes the northern 13th Compound as the heart of Dharavi’s recycling industry, where an estimated 80 percent of Mumbai’s plastic waste is recycled in approximately 15,000 single-room factories.²⁵ It also describes the southern Kumbharwada region as production spaces of the migrant potters from Saurashtra. The Maharashtra Slum Redevelopment Authority (SRA) describes Dharavi’s growth as “closely interwoven with the pattern of migration into Bombay”,²⁶ due to the land being free and

unregulated. Together with Muslim tanners from Tamil Nadu, artisans and embroidery workers from Uttar Pradesh and other migrants setting up retail food shops, the area provides employment opportunities irrespective of region, caste, and religion. The SRA also states that most of the land in Dharavi is owned by government agencies, making it easier to set up informal settlement.

These industries and labour are part of the informal economy – it is not taxed, it is not monitored by the government, nor is its contribution to the overall economy of the city properly accounted for. Interventions to improve the infrastructure, provide sanitation, drainage, and electricity facilities are ad-hoc and not policy-driven.

In order to increase awareness about the poor living conditions, there exist several profit-making Dharavi slum tours, which also claim to be facilitating the development of the community. A company founded in 2005 provides educational walking tours of Dharavi. The company claims that 80 percent of its profits go to its NGO, which runs high-quality education programmes for Dharavi residents. Another company, started by Dharavi residents themselves, works to support local students to study full-time and also trains and employs them as tour guides.

On several global tourism portals, “five-star” reviews for these tours highlight their so-called “awareness quotient”. The reviews range from wanting to “meet some additional locals as they were all extremely nice and friendly” to expressing surprise that there was “extreme poverty everywhere, but so much life!”²⁷ Most of the “Poor” and “Terrible” reviews do not mention the nature of tourism, but rather

disapprove of the experience in the dirty, congested slum. Reviewers generally note that though there was poverty, there was no suffering and people living in the slums “seemed happy”. Melissa Nisbett, professor at King’s College London, analysed more than 230 such reviews and concluded that for most Dharavi visitors, desolation in poverty simply did not exist. Nisbett’s analyses of the reviews show that “poverty was ignored, denied, overlooked and romanticised, but moreover, it was de-politicised.”²⁸ Without discussing the reasons why the slums existed, the tours de-contextualised the plight of the poor and seemed only to empower the privileged, she noted. A contrary view is held by other analysts, including for instance, Fabian Frenzel, who argues that since poverty lacks recognition and voice, tourism provides the audience a much-needed story to be told, and even “taking the most commodifying tour is better than ignoring that inequality completely.”²⁹

One of the main slum tour operators in Dharavi is not based in the area and only ropes in locals to lead the tours. Its website³⁰ takes pride in Dharavi’s thriving industry. Dharavi is portrayed as the hub that “supplies celebrations for a century” (through handcrafted idols and sweets), “the height of fashion” (the second-largest leather apparel industry in India), and the birth of “Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan” (due to 80 percent of the city’s plastic being recycled here). The website then describes how tourists have been “inspired” by visiting these successful industries “in the midst of derelict conditions”. The question that needs to be asked is whether such depictions end up obscuring the need to improve the living conditions of the residents.

The company claims that “bulldozing [Dharavi] and starting again” would be

unfeasible. In slums like Dharavi, common ground needs to be found where industry is recognised and legalised and given the correct infrastructure to thrive. Property rights on land and dwellings must be created for the residents under the purview of the development schemes of the government to enable them to participate actively in the formal economy with better access to credit.

Plans for the redevelopment of Dharavi have been mooted for nearly 15 years and gone through multiple stages, recommending various permutations and combinations of public-private-partnerships (PPP) for the project. The current Dharavi Redevelopment Plan will be operated as a Special Purpose Vehicle under the Dharavi Redevelopment Authority and funded by the government and a private company based in Dubai. While it seems like this plan might finally take shape in the near future, there needs to be a concerted effort to not only focus on amenities, maintenance, and rehabilitation, but a clear understanding of the nature of economic activities and the spatial requirements. The Dharavi slum industry is thriving and income-generating, and any significant adverse impact of the SRA’s redevelopment plan would be detrimental and unsustainable for its denizens. Until such time that the much-debated redevelopment becomes a reality, Dharavi will continue to attract slum tourists.

AWARENESS OF POVERTY OR OBFUSCATION OF DEVELOPMENT?

Slum tours can become part of a vicious cycle where the run-down aspects of a community are used for commercial gain. The section of the community that benefits from the tours has no incentive to participate in improving the

community. While infrastructure development projects are at a standstill due to the lack of property rights and the informal nature of the economic activities, being outside the tax net is also beneficial to the poor artisans. These factors have led to a community that has—either willingly or unwillingly—found itself embedded into an ethically-inappropriate but financially-viable conundrum.

The government needs to find viable alternatives for such communities – alternatives that support its active industry, while also covering the opportunity costs of eliminating slum tourism. There are currently already about 100 construction projects in Dharavi undertaken by the SRA, which are mainly limited to housing.³¹ However, such redevelopment must ensure that the existing industrial infrastructure is also protected and refurbished. Residents are likely to reject housing that does not sustain their current ecosystem for income-generation. These residents can have better housing conditions and commercial opportunities and should not be living in the squalor that slum tours tend to glorify and sustain. The redevelopment plan will face stiff opposition, distrust, and backlash, unless the complexity of economic activities and the interrelated nature of dwellings and industrial units is properly mapped and taken into account in the design of the redevelopment plan. It is essential to educate the community through the process by providing examples of successful redevelopment projects, imparting the importance of basic infrastructure (including hygiene, sanitation, electricity, and

housing), and ensuring that there is no loss to indigenous industries. Slum tourism will die a natural death if the people living in slums are empowered with efficient civic amenities along with housing, workplaces, and formal property rights.

Writer Manu Joseph’s account of ecotourism is relevant in the slum tourism debate as well: if an industry is going to function without the support of the informed and the ethical, then it is at risk of becoming more callous.³² Slum tours in the townships of South Africa and the favelas of Brazil have a clear objective of raising historical and cultural awareness about the destitute areas. Similar tours in Dharavi, however, seem to be running on the profitability of showcasing uplifting stories of industriousness despite adversity, altogether forgetting to bother with any element of historical or cultural awareness.

While citizens of the slum areas might seem to benefit from these tours, finding an alternative form of development in terms of industry and employment is essential in order to lift the community from this irony of “profitable poverty”. Slum tourism in India does not appear to have created any impetus in this direction, as is evident from the case of Dharavi. Slum tours aim to dispel notions that people may have of slums being a place of misery; however, the glorification of slum tourism is unjustified, as it may actually serve to evade the real issues and challenges confronting slum dwellers and their prospects for improving their lives. [ORF](#)

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