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# Exploring Pedagogic Presence: Colonial Rhetoric and the Discourse of Volunteer Teaching Abroad

Emma Ruohoniemi  
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

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**Exploring Pedagogic Presence: Colonial Rhetoric and the Discourse of  
Volunteer Teaching Abroad**

Education Studies Capstone (EDST 400 & 410)

Emma Ruohoniemi

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Advisor: Dr. Talya Zemach-Bersin

## Introduction

*“I’m supposed to be here helping hurting, needy people and learning about the harsh realities of third world life. Instead I’m eating homemade chocolate cake in a Bible study and listening to students complain about walking 5 minutes uphill to campus.”*

I wrote these words as an 18-year-old gap-year volunteer teaching at an international Christian boarding school in South India. I had carefully selected the school as a long-established, intentionally diverse space that always needed practical short-term help. I grew up ten years in Nepal as the daughter of a long-term missionary family, so I thought I knew the pitfalls of short-term volunteering. During my childhood I had scorned the volunteers who began confident of transforming Nepali villages through building a new church or school, but left with little more accomplished than profile pictures taken with raggedly-dressed children. I would never have thought to associate a white savior complex with *my* mindsets and speech. Yet looking back on my words after studying colonial discourse, I feel profoundly uncomfortable. I was discontent because I wanted to have a more significant impact. In my words I can see expectations that center me as the needed intervention in a deeply broken world, an attitude with clear correlations in colonialism. Even though my family legacy was focused on serving and teaching in South Asia with love and wisdom, I was not invulnerable to participating in colonial discourse. By examining the resonances between volunteer teaching abroad discourse and colonial discourse, I argue that I am one of many volunteer teachers in South Asia thinking and speaking in line with the colonial mindsets that deeply impacted South Asia during the British Raj.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, South Asia applies to colonial India (modern day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) when referencing colonial discourse and modern day India and Nepal when addressing volunteer discourse. Although Nepal was never formally under colonial rule, Nepal shows the ripple effects of colonialism. I have chosen

A quick internet search easily reveals countless programs offering international volunteering experiences which promise to turn wanderlust into a chance to change the world for the better. The “voluntourism” industry is booming: a 2015 study by B. J. Lough from Washington University in St Louis estimated about a million Americans volunteer internationally each year.<sup>2</sup> An overwhelming number of these volunteers are involved in teaching or tutoring, working with children and/or adults in English class, but other teaching options include yoga, math, art, and vocational skills.<sup>3</sup> Although many academics originally praised international volunteering, noting its intentions of being an ethical alternative to mass tourism, the past 15 years have produced a broad body of literature that critique the vast majority of voluntourism, volunteer teaching abroad included, as exploitative, neoliberal, and neocolonial.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the claims of this literature, at first glance, little similarity exists between lone short-term volunteer teachers and the vast, long-standing governmental systems of education in colonial South Asia between the 18th and 20th centuries. Education was fundamental to the colonizing mission as both a tool of control and a justification for foreign rule. Scholar Sanjay Seth observes that in British-occupied India “colonialism itself came to be seen as an essentially *pedagogic exercise*,” a monopoly over land, bodies, and minds that legitimized itself on the claim that the British Raj morally and culturally instructed and elevated Indian society.<sup>5</sup>

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to focus on India and Nepal because they have cultural and religious similarities and the majority of South Asian foreign volunteer programs.

<sup>2</sup> Lough, B. J. (2015). *A Decade of International Volunteering from the United States, 2004 to 2014*. Washington University in St Louis Center for Social Development. Retrieved from [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=csd\\_research](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=csd_research)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Wearing, S., Young, T., & Everingham, P. (2017). Evaluating volunteer tourism: has it made a difference? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 512–521. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02508281.2017.1345470>

<sup>5</sup> Seth, S. (2007). *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*. Durham: Duke University Press. doi: 9780822341055, 2.

Volunteer teaching abroad, on the other hand, draws individuals from around the world, primarily from the USA and Europe, to invest in South Asian education in small ways for an intentionally limited time. These programs generally last approximately one to six weeks, and all require an application and payment of program fees. Thus volunteer teaching abroad is thus not just a framework for altruistic activity, but a competitive industry that must sell itself on and then fulfill certain promises and ideals. Colonial education was a top-down system; volunteer teaching abroad is bottom-up.

Even if practices are disparate, this paper establishes connecting lines between discourses. Comparing the substantial body of literature on colonial and imperial discourse with online advertising and testimonials/reviews from volunteer teaching abroad in South Asia demonstrates similar themes and modes of thought. Discourse reveals attitudes and motivations that collectively inform cultures, policies, and economies. Western nations are still deeply entangled in South Asia. For example, India received the most American economic assistance of any nation between the years of 1946-2012.<sup>6</sup> Scholars criticize this international aid as modern imperialism, maintaining Western private capital exports, military bases, and raw material sources, as well as general political influence.<sup>7</sup> The rhetorical continuity between colonial discourse on education and volunteer teaching abroad discourse represents the substantive continuity between the actions of colonial governments and modern Western governments.

At the heart of these discourses is the idea that imperial intervention is mutually beneficial to the colonizer and the colonized. Scholar David Spurr argues that one of

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<sup>6</sup> Rajghatta, C. (2016, July 16). India top recipient of US economic aid - Times of India. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/India-top-recipient-of-US-economic-aid/articleshow/48093123.cms>.

<sup>7</sup> Chandra, N. (1973). Western Imperialism and India Today-I. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8(4/6), 221. Retrieved April 30, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/4362294](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4362294)

colonialism's "fundamental principles" is that "a colonized people is morally improved and edified by virtue of its participation in the colonial system."<sup>8</sup> Even as the colonizers reap economic and political benefits at the expense of their colonies, they argue the pedagogy of their presence provides at least equal, if not generous recompense. Volunteer discourse goes even further by proposing a semblance of equality. The volunteers and locals each take positions of both teachers and learners, reciprocally exchanging something that the other values. According to scholar Mary Louise Pratt, this narrative of reciprocity is a hallmark of the imperial capitalist gaze.<sup>9</sup> Neocolonialism, as a part of a globalized world, fundamentally relies on capitalist modes of buying, selling, and negotiating power. Yet Pratt argues that even though capitalism is about defending one's own interest rather than seeking a culture of reciprocity, "that capitalism retains [reciprocity] as one of the stories it tells itself about itself. The difference between equal and unequal exchange is suppressed."<sup>10</sup> In volunteer teaching abroad, this capitalist self-interest means that even the apparent reciprocity of both teaching and learning, the volunteer discourse consolidates the colonial power of the volunteer and is oriented around the volunteer's values and metrics of success.

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<sup>8</sup> Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Pratt, M. L. (2007). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (n.p.): Taylor & Francis, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 84.

## Western Teacher and South Asian Student

*“You may find that in your hands is the responsibility of making a difference in their lives, just by giving them a chance to learn about the outside world.”<sup>11</sup>*

Volunteer teaching abroad implicitly assigns the role of teacher to a Western volunteer and the role of student to locals. At first glance, the volunteer teaching endeavor appears divorced from colonial methods. Instead of directly ruling a people for decades, the short-term volunteer participates in local structures for a limited period of time. However, as volunteer teachers position their students relative to themselves and create narratives of need and success, they narrate themselves, like their colonial predecessors, as white saviors rescuing a supposedly deeply debased people by bringing them into Western civilization.

### Naturally Backward Society

When Western volunteers arrive in South Asia for the first time, they encounter widespread poverty of an objectively higher caliber than their own nations.<sup>12</sup> Personal experience of this reality often forces volunteers to formulate an understanding of how and why such poverty exists. One British volunteer teacher who worked with VWI in India expressed these sentiments about Indian society and poverty:

How can a country with aspirations of becoming one of the world's “Superpowers” justify the poverty and pollution which exists there? How can they spend billions on space and nuclear programmes when so many people are living in squalor? I don't have any answers except that their culture and religious beliefs have evolved over hundreds of

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<sup>11</sup> Himalayan Volunteering Opportunities. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.givingway.com/organization/himalayan-volunteering-opportunities?=blog>

<sup>12</sup> Waghmare, A. (2019, October 16). India is 102 in Hunger Index of 117 nations, undoing decade of improvement. *Business Standard*. Retrieved from [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-takes-the-low-rung-ranked-102-in-hunger-index-of-117-countries-119101501494\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-takes-the-low-rung-ranked-102-in-hunger-index-of-117-countries-119101501494_1.html)

years and embrace the caste system, arranged marriages and many other aspects of their lives that we in the West find “alien”.<sup>13</sup>

This quote positions the volunteer from one of the Western “superpowers” relative to the people of an aspiring developing world. The volunteer makes an implicit comparison, seeming to ask with an air of superiority, “how are *we* so far ahead of *you*?” His answer uses the word “evolve,” which implies a sense of progression, but this progression has created “poverty and pollution” and “squalor.” Western cultural development, however, free of India’s strange “alien” practices, has resulted in a relatively affluent and equitable society. The volunteer, as a mere observer, traces a history that fundamentally identifies India with its poverty. Studying colonial discourse demonstrates how active assessments of gender, caste, and class have created this colonial gaze that identifies social backwardness as egregious, intrinsic, and endogenous.

### *The Pathetic State of South Asian Women*

The “condition of females” has traditionally been used as “a touchstone of the colonial evaluation of indigenous culture.”<sup>14</sup> Colonial writers found much female depravity to focus on in India: “child marriage, the absolute subordination of the female in the household, seclusion of the female from the public gaze, female infanticide, *sati*, and the hopeless lot of widows.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than understand gender inequality as a global issue, Savage notes how 19th century missionary Priscilla Chapman centers her description of the state of women around an “aversion to Hinduism as the all-pervading agent of female oppression.”<sup>16</sup> South Asian women are uniquely and profoundly pathetic; their oppression is deeply ingrained in South Asian religion

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<sup>13</sup> Teaching Volunteer Project India. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteer-india/26783>

<sup>14</sup> Savage, D. W. (1997). Missionaries and the Development of a Colonial Ideology of Female Education in India. *Gender & History*, 9(2), 202.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 208.

and therefore society. This position can still be seen in volunteer discourse today, with one website advertising a women's empowerment program in Nepal by stating:

Nepali women are born into a patriarchal society. In all cases women's rights are subordinate to those of men. Married early, with little or no education, no land rights or independent income, women are a voiceless section of society, dependent on men for their welfare and bearing the continued weight of cultural and social discrimination and violence against them.<sup>17</sup>

This bleak image makes oppression and depravity essential to the experience of living as a South Asian woman historically and contemporarily. Saying "American women are born into a patriarchal society" would feel like a strangely absolute association of Americanism and patriarchy, even if the statement reflects reality. Western women are portrayed as fighting for their rights, but in colonial discourse, women need to be rescued "by a masculinized national state that casts itself in a paternal role, saving those who are abused by rival men and nations."<sup>18</sup> Volunteer and colonial discourse make female suffering a deep-rooted issue that South Asians cannot and do not right on their own.

### *Casting Blame in Caste and Poverty*

If colonial observers have marked women as the emblematic wretched victims of South Asian society, caste has been portrayed as the most pervasive mechanism of oppression. In considering developing education in India, civil servant Charles Trevelyan wrote in the 1830s, "Learning is confined by it to the Brahmins, the high priests of the system, by whom and for whom it was devised. All the other classes are condemned to perpetual ignorance and dependence; their appropriate occupations are assigned by the laws of caste, and limits are fixed,

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<sup>17</sup> Women's Empowerment Program. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.volunteersinitiativenepal.org/women-empowerment-program/>

<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, E. S. (2002). Rescuing Women and Children. *The Journal of American History*, 89(2), 456. doi: 10.2307/3092166

beyond which no personal merit or personal good fortune can raise them.”<sup>19</sup> The colonial observer despised caste not only for creating unequal standards of living, but for forbidding anyone to rise through “personal merit” above their preordained caste position. Such a rigid system appeared anathema to a British civil servant system that relied on merit-based competitive examinations.<sup>20</sup>

This indignant critique of Indian society ignores how, through such language, the British actually codified and exacerbated caste inequality during the Raj. Even with their introduction of educational initiatives meant to undermine caste inequality, the governmental categorization and systemization of caste during the Raj fostered deeper levels of caste conflict by making caste oppression national instead of a local process.<sup>21</sup> Although caste was supposedly a marker of the inherent brokenness of Indian society, the strict, subcontinent-wide system of oppression of the past 150 years is as much a British creation as an Indian one.

Surprisingly, the volunteer interview quoted at the beginning of this section was the only mention of caste I found on major volunteering websites. These websites instead frame issues of inequality in vague economic class language with statements like “India still faces problems of unemployment and poverty”<sup>22</sup> or “public schools welcome native English speakers to teach a valuable skills [sic] that will help students of poor families to grow up and get well-paying jobs, breaking the cycle of poverty.”<sup>23</sup> Although this shift may seem to reflect a divergence from

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<sup>19</sup> Trevelyan, C. E. (1838). *On the education of the people of India*. London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Kazin, Michael, Edwards, Rebecca, and Rothman, Adam. (2010). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History Volume 2*. Princeton University Press, 142.

<sup>21</sup> Riser-Kositsky, S. (2009). The Political Intensification of Caste: India Under the Raj. *Penn History Review*, 17(1), 31–53. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=phr>

<sup>22</sup> Volunteering Abroad! (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.newhopevolunteers.org/volunteer-in-india/teaching-children-project.php>

<sup>23</sup> Volunteer Teaching English in India!. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.ifrevolunteers.org/india/volunteer-teaching-english-in-india>

colonial discourse, the omission of caste in discussions of Indian society continues the legacy of exacerbating inequality by creating false narratives of caste. Suraj Yengde argues in his landmark book *Caste Matters* that language of economic social mobility masks and condones upper-caste privilege and dominance. He claims that “Brahmins and other ‘upper’-caste Indian academics and influential scholars attempt to divert attention [from caste oppression] by making a case in terms of class.” Without acknowledging how the British institutionalized caste inequality *and* promulgated ideas of meritocracy, the fault rests on low-caste Indians for not rising above their abject conditions.

The poverty narrative similarly blames South Asia for issues that have colonial roots. Scholar David Spurr notes how, in colonial discourse, poverty is “created ex machina and unrelated, except for purposes of dramatic contrast, to the prosperity that thrives on other shores -- unrelated, that is, to colonial history.”<sup>24</sup> When volunteer websites make statements like “Sadly, for many children in India, school is simply not an option. It is estimated that there are more than 11 million marginalized and vulnerable children living in slums and extremely poor areas in India,”<sup>25</sup> poverty becomes a sad, unfortunate reality instead of the historical result of systemic exploitation and oppression. Economic exploitation by Western nations has created and continues to enforce economic inequalities in South Asia.<sup>26</sup> When foreign volunteer teachers participate in this rhetoric of divorcing poverty from its complex colonial history, they portray South Asia as simply one of those naturally backward places. South Asian depravity does not

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<sup>24</sup> Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Volunteer Teaching English in India!. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.ifrevolunteers.org/india/volunteer-teaching-english-in-india>

<sup>26</sup> Prasad, P. (1996). Dynamics of Neo-Colonial Exploitation. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(12), 719-722. Retrieved April 4, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/4403934](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403934)

consist of just superficial problems but a deep cultural brokenness that requires a fundamental rehaul.

### **Justifying Colonial Intervention**

Education is often propounded as the way to transform cultures and elevate humanity. Or in the words of a volunteer website: “Education is the key to unlocking the vast potential of the human race.”<sup>27</sup> However, considering education has long existed in various forms in South Asia,<sup>28</sup> education in itself must not be the solution to cultural brokenness. Indian education is seen as insufficient, implicated in the cultural phenomena of gender and caste oppression.<sup>29</sup> Education, the potential solution, instead also requires a transformation. Both colonial and current volunteer teacher observers position themselves as necessary saviors to close the gap between the potential and the reality of education.

### *Crying Out in Need*

When colonial actors intervene in a foreign country, they justify their actions as the response to “chaos that calls for restoration of order, of absence that calls for affirming presence.”<sup>30</sup> In the case of South Asia, this “chaos” was written into the social fabric. One 19th century British academic judged that “India. . . must be emancipated from its own culture.”<sup>31</sup> Emancipation requires a powerful entity to free the otherwise hopeless victim. This language of profound and unique need has continued into volunteer discourse. One volunteer teacher

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<sup>27</sup> Teaching Volunteer Abroad: Volunteer Abroad with United Planet. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.unitedplanet.org/teaching-volunteer-abroad>

<sup>28</sup> Di Bona, J. E. (1981). Indigenous Virtue and Foreign Vice: Alternative Perspectives on Colonial Education. *Comparative Education Review*, 25(2), 202–215. doi: 10.1086/446208

<sup>29</sup> Ellis, C. (2009). Education for All: Reassessing the Historiography of Education in Colonial India. *History Compass*, 7(2), 365. doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2008.00564.x

<sup>30</sup> Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, C. (2008). Making colonial subjects: education in the age of empire. *History of Education*, 37(6), 784. doi: 10.1080/00467600802106206

commented after his time at a Nepali monastery, “We get paid to help people in our countries, many of whom as we all know do not deserve it, in Nepal people do not ask you for help but I guarantee you they absolutely need and deserve it.”<sup>32</sup> This volunteer draws a divide between the “needy” of Western nations and Nepal. He claims the level of poverty and depravity is so much greater in Nepal that the Western undeserving should not receive assistance even if they ask for it and Nepali deserving should receive assistance even if they do not ask for it. This volunteer does not trust Nepalis’ own voices, but believes the “neediness” he observes speaks most honestly for them, sending out a clear call for help.

Volunteer teaching abroad discourse frames South Asian educational systems as similarly calling for intervention, as reflected in this website’s appeal for teachers in India:

In government schools there are very limited budgets and therefore lack quality teaching staff and proper infrastructure. Rote learning is the main method of teaching in these schools and this results in the lack of deep understanding of certain subjects and does not encourage the use of social skills amongst students.<sup>33</sup>

The language in this description focuses on “lack,” absence and insufficiency that applies not just materially but methodologically and socially. This complete lack, as a voice, does not request monetary support for good indigenous causes, but begs for an external intervention to transform both thinking and practice.

### *The Superiority of Western Knowing*

In the aforementioned quote about lack in government schools, Indian rote learning is critiqued as an inferior way of learning, though memorization has long been connected to Indian

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<sup>32</sup>Teaching in Monasteries in Nepal: Love Volunteers. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.goabroad.com/providers/love-volunteers/programs/teaching-in-monasteries-in-nepal-101718#listing-reviews>

<sup>33</sup> Volunteer Teaching English India: Kochi: Volunteer Abroad. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://volunteeringjourneys.com/teaching-english-volunteer-india/>

ways of knowing.<sup>34</sup> This same critique of rote learning can be found in colonial British discourse, which argued “the Indian mode of knowing and thinking was radically different from what the British assumed was the natural or normal form, and which they used as a standard by which they could adjudge Indian forms of knowledge as marred or inadequate, rather than different.”<sup>35</sup> This superiority of Western ways of knowing forms the philosophy underlying the rhetoric of need and intervention.

In South Asian colonial discourse, this superiority manifested most clearly in supporting the implementation of English medium education. In 1835, British politician Thomas Macaulay wrote his famous *Minute on Indian Education*, which argued “English should be introduced as the medium of instruction in all the institutions of learning as 'that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations.’”<sup>36</sup> Colonizers saw English instruction as a practical tool for control, but also a necessity for India to progress on a global scale: “India could only enter the modern world by becoming as English as it could, by knowing English language and literature, by absorbing those cultural riches, by being assimilated, in so far as it was possible, to English values.”<sup>37</sup> These colonial attitudes resulted in a modern globalizing India where English now offers a popular and reliable path towards individual social mobility, creating sharp social

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<sup>34</sup> Cohn, B. (1996). *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India*, 52-53. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01826>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ghosh, C. (1995) Bentinck, Macaulay and the introduction of English education in India, *History of Education*, 24 (1), 17. doi: 10.1080/0046760950240102

<sup>37</sup> Hall, C. (2008). Making colonial subjects: education in the age of empire. *History of Education*, 37(6), 785. doi: 10.1080/00467600802106206

divides between those who can be English educated and those who cannot.<sup>38</sup> One volunteer website noted:

Kerala is known to be one of the most progressive states in India with very high literacy rates (almost 99%). This percentage however is calculated by the ability to read and [sic] write in the local language Malayalam only. This makes our English teaching program a necessity especially for underprivileged children attending local government schools where the medium of teaching is in the local language.<sup>39</sup>

This quote ignores the complex political debate of language in India education, refusing to acknowledge that indigenous language learning might have any value or that it might be problematic that English, a clear legacy of imperialism, still dominates Indian education.

Volunteer discourse still paints indigenous language as “marred or inadequate” and English as a vast treasure trove, not just socially but psychologically. “By volunteering as an English teacher in India, you will provide hope for a better future for children who otherwise would not expect much out of life.”<sup>40</sup> This quote implies that learning English is not only the means of social advancement, but the source of even being able to hope or dream about a better life. When volunteer teaching abroad websites describe English learning as imparting a certain mindset along with the skill, they align themselves with the colonial vision of English language as the bearer of English values. Language shapes thinking and feeling as much thinking and feeling is communicated through language. English language, even in the Indian context, is laden with English/Western ideas of right and wrong, value and authority.

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<sup>38</sup> Faust, D., & Nagar, R. (2001). Politics of Development in Postcolonial India: English-Medium Education and Social Fracturing. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(30), 2878-2883. Retrieved April 12, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/4410920](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4410920)

<sup>39</sup> Volunteer Teaching English India: Kochi: Volunteer Abroad. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://volunteeringjourneys.com/teaching-english-volunteer-india/>

<sup>40</sup> Volunteer Teaching English in India. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.ifrevolunteers.org/india/volunteer-teaching-english-in-india>

## West-Centered Success in Education

In colonial discourse, Western modes of thinking and operating function not only as the panacea for the colonized, but as the metric for evaluating the effectiveness of that panacea. The societal brokenness that validated the colonial intervention fades out of view, and the discourse instead focuses on how interventions changed how the colonized can and do engage in Western spaces. English education in South Asia has claimed to be creating an educated elite who would “eventually so influence their own culture that India would become a modern trading nation,”<sup>41</sup> but has instead celebrated removing South Asian individuals from the spaces they are meant to transform, thereby perpetuating the colonial mission.

Some measures of success unashamedly value how colonial interventions sustain themselves, simultaneously creating and filling the need for their presence. During the Raj, Indian princes were often taken to Britain for their education to “accustom the princes to a political relationship with the empire that was benign and familiar but also paternal and awe-inspiring.”<sup>42</sup> This combination of affection and fear would create loyal star pupils who supported the continued pedagogic presence of the British empire in India. A similar circularity appears in volunteer discourse: “Help students improve their English to open the door to better employment opportunities in a growing tourism industry.”<sup>43</sup> Volunteer teaching abroad is meant to offer an ethical alternative to traditional tourism, but can perpetuate the economic and cultural

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<sup>41</sup> Hall, C. (2008). Making colonial subjects: education in the age of empire. *History of Education*, 37(6), 785. doi: 10.1080/00467600802106206

<sup>42</sup> Sen, S. (2003). The Politics of Deracination: Empire, Education and Elite Children in Colonial India. *Studies in History*, 19(1), 23. doi: 10.1177/025764300301900102

<sup>43</sup> Volunteer Teaching in Nepal: Projects Abroad. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.projects-abroad.org/projects/volunteer-teaching-nepal/>

exploitation of the tourism industry.<sup>44</sup> Yet volunteer discourse, like colonial discourse, paints a self-sustaining system of foreign involvement as desirable.

Even where the discourse is not West-serving, success is West-oriented, focusing on whether South Asian people can leave South Asia. Although speaking about African brain drain, Sefa Dei and Asgharzadeh's ideas apply to the same phenomenon in South Asia: "Consciously or not, many of us believe in this colonial myth that Western culture, materialism, and civilization are superior to ours. . . a logical consequence of this infatuation with the West materializes when we are able to pack our bags and leave for the West."<sup>45</sup> Although no volunteer discourse directly mentions or encourages brain drain, volunteers demonstrate an association of educational success with physical spaces outside where children already are. One volunteer justified her teaching in this way:

You may find that in your hands is the responsibility of making a difference in their lives, just by giving them a chance to learn about the outside world. You might wonder how you can influence them just in a couple of weeks. In fact, for children every moment you spend with them can become a vital seed which grows into hope and an inspiration for a better future.<sup>46</sup>

The volunteer's very presence is pedagogic because she communicates the reality of an outside world that these children can aspire towards and hope for. As a Western woman with an apparent level of affluence she represents a "better future": what their lives could be, but what they would not imagine unless she provides the example. This hope, instead of grounding these children in

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<sup>44</sup> Wearing, S., Young, T., & Everingham, P. (2017). Evaluating volunteer tourism: has it made a difference? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 512–521. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02508281.2017.1345470>

<sup>45</sup> Sefa Dei, G., & Asgharzadeh, A. (2002). What Is to Be Done? A Look at Some Causes and Consequences of the African Brain Drain. *African Issues*, 30(1), 32. doi:10.2307/1167087

<sup>46</sup> Himalayan Volunteering Opportunities. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.givingway.com/organization/himalayan-volunteering-opportunities?=blog>

their village and its potential, points them outside in ways that devalue local spaces and create brain drain.

## Western Student and South Asian Teacher

*“Eventually, you'll ask yourself, who teaches whom? You? Or are the greatest teachers right here in front of you?”<sup>47</sup>*

Although volunteering discourse often morally justifies volunteering with humanitarian ideas of serving and giving back, it sells itself as a transformative learning experience for the volunteer. The members of the host community become unintentional teachers, edifying the volunteers simply by existing within or participating in the volunteers' world. Examining the language of volunteer teaching abroad reveals that this seemingly deferential attempt to listen to host communities nonetheless participates in colonial rhetoric and attitudes.

### Unfamiliar Adventure: Learning about the World

Scholar Pramod Nayar describes how colonial travel narratives in India process viewing an unfamiliar, empty, and threatening landscape in three moments: first, a moment of “self-preservation” in the face of threat, followed by a moment of “affirmation” that inscribes meaning into the landscape, and ending with a moment of “appreciation” once the traveler has moved into a position of safety, the *locus amoenus*.<sup>48</sup> Nayar argues that this rhetorical process carries colonial ideologies because “the search for the *locus amoenus* is couched in a georgic rhetoric of improvement where Indian desolation is associated with its past, and the ‘improved’ site with the future, mediated by the English's present/presence.”<sup>49</sup> In this sense, even the relatively passive, observant posture of the traveler still participates in colonial interventionist discourse.

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<sup>47</sup> Himalayan Volunteering Opportunities. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.givingway.com/organization/himalayan-volunteering-opportunities?=blog>

<sup>48</sup> Nayar, P. (2002). The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 57-99. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40339521](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339521)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

As international tourists, volunteer teachers often inhabit a similar rhetorical space as the colonial travelers who came before them. Nayar's framework of the search for the *locus amoenus* can be applied to their reflections on their experiences engaging with a new country and culture. One volunteer from England expressed these concerns in her review of teaching with Love Volunteers in Nepal:

The first day I got here it was a massive culture shock, Kathmandu airport was absolutely chaotic along with all the streets in Nepal so I was really starting to think 'what have I got myself into!' I was genuinely worried that I wouldn't be able to make it through my placement because of the difficulty I was having settling into the new culture.<sup>50</sup>

This volunteer observes her own initial panicked reaction to the novel environment, so deeply threatened by the unfamiliarity that she considers leaving. Like her focus on the “chaotic” appearance of the airport and street, Nayar describes how travelers’ descriptions of desolation in Indian landscapes participate in a “rhetoric of inflation” where uncontrolled chaos poses the major threat.<sup>51</sup> The threatening chaos feels especially egregious because the Western traveler/observer does not understand it.

This volunteer's reflection then enters the second moment of affirmation when she imbues the landscape with meaning: “However, after the first few days, you realise that it really is the charisma of the country and all the little glitches along the way that makes you love the experience even more.”<sup>52</sup> The volunteer mitigates the threat by repainting the “chaotic” faultiness as mere endearing “glitches.” She reframes her cultural shock as becoming accustomed to

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<sup>50</sup>Teaching in Monasteries in Nepal: Love Volunteers. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.goabroad.com/providers/love-volunteers/programs/teaching-in-monasteries-in-nepal-101718#listing-reviews>

<sup>51</sup>Nayar, P. (2002). The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 61. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40339521](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339521)

<sup>52</sup>Teaching in Monasteries in Nepal: Love Volunteers. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.goabroad.com/providers/love-volunteers/programs/teaching-in-monasteries-in-nepal-101718#listing-reviews>

Nepal's strange but charming idiosyncrasies, further demarcating an us-and-them difference. This sympathetic response sets up her *locus amoenus*: "The placement is far from easy, but the challenge makes it all the more rewarding. . . eating Dal baht every day, having to take cold showers and crossing the crazy roads is all part of the experience!" The chaos of Nepali culture becomes the ground for Katie to prove her own strength and adaptability. She nobly sacrifices by assimilating into certain aspects of the formerly threatening culture. Nayar notes a similar type of *locus amoenus* when he argues "the Indian landscape becomes a site of heroic endeavour,"<sup>53</sup> a space existing not for itself, but for the colonial traveler to actualize himself within by functioning as a savior. The review also reflects this theme of heroism. For this volunteer, the important lesson seems not to be the increased cultural knowledge in itself, but how interaction with that culture gave her the opportunity to learn how to overcome new and unexpected "challenge."

Other volunteers face the threat of a new cultural environment and find their *locus amoenus* instead by creating space between themselves and the threat. One volunteer said of her program:

The staff have exactly the right balance between what a Western tourist needs, and immersing them in Indian culture so they feel absolutely at home and not like a tourist at all. I felt safe and comfortable at all times in a country so different to anything I had experienced before. . . How to have the best of all possible worlds, travelling while feeling at home, the most wonderful scenery with plenty of time to see it around worthwhile work that benefits a community unlike any other you're likely to have experienced, and shopping until you drop.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nayar, P. (2002). The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 70. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40339521](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339521)

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/ispiice/21387>

Her space of safety is a compromise between the threat of unfamiliar cultural experiences and the security of familiar amenities, a balance between outward-focused community service and self-oriented fun like shopping. She repeatedly uses the phrase “feeling at home,” evoking a sense of her Indian environment being reoriented to accommodate her and her expectations, similar to a colonial *locum amoenus* where English had built structures and systems in their own style.<sup>55</sup> This volunteer participates in an India that fits her sensibilities: foreign enough to be exciting and adventurous, but not too foreign that she ever feels uncomfortable.

These two volunteers respond differently to their foreign adventure, yet in each case they narrate the South Asian landscape as a space to be controlled, insufficient in itself, requiring the volunteer’s mediation. Even as learners, absorbing a new culture, the volunteers participate in rhetoric that can justify colonial intervention.

### **Philosophizing: Learning about Self and Humanity**

Although volunteers often describe their struggles adjusting to a new culture, an even more common narrative expresses an unexpected appreciation for and closeness with previously unfamiliar people. In many ways, this affinity seems opposed to colonial rhetoric that paints the colonized people as distant and backward. Scholar David Spurr argues, though, that “the ultimate aim of colonial discourse is not to establish a radical opposition between colonizer and colonized,” but colonizers instead seek to “dominate by inclusion and domestication rather than by a confrontation which recognizes the independent identity of the Other.”<sup>56</sup> In colonial discourse, the colonized people, tainted by their cultural backwardness, nonetheless

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<sup>55</sup> Nayar, P. (2002). The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 83. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40339521](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339521)

<sup>56</sup> Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 32.

fundamentally share a common humanity and therefore common values with their colonizers. The colonized people function as a mirror for the colonizers, a physical incarnation of their desires. This same rhetoric can be found in the philosophical reflections inspired by volunteer's positive interactions with South Asians. Although these philosophical musings are often framed as the product of a novel cross-cultural learning experience, they can instead impose widespread Western ideals and values on South Asian realities in accordance with colonial discourse.

*Authenticity: "What We Used to Be"*

Tourism literature has long been concerned with the concept of authenticity, some arguing that tourist travel is fundamentally a search for authenticity.<sup>57</sup> Authenticity for tourists often refers to an imagined idyllic past of humanity, rather than an unmediated, unmanufactured experience of another culture.<sup>58</sup> For example, a volunteer teaching in a "beautiful and authentic" Indian village reflected that in "dealing with [the children's] purity you might find something which was almost forgotten and lost in your own life."<sup>59</sup> The Indian village children with "simple, straight, open and transparent" minds bring up a nostalgia for an uncomplicated and uncorrupted time in her life. By directing her conversation towards a presumably Western "you," she subsumes the Indian children into an imagined collective history of a Western "we." The children do not teach her from their own example of juvenile simplicity, but remind her to reclaim a value that "advanced" Western adulthood has almost forced from her. In true imperial fashion, the volunteer retains all the authority, the protagonist progressing through a world populated by foils.

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<sup>57</sup> MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3), 589-603. Retrieved April 25, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/2776259](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776259)

<sup>58</sup> Korpela, M. (2010). A Postcolonial Imagination? Westerners Searching for Authenticity in India. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(8), 1299-1315. DOI: 10.1080/13691831003687725

<sup>59</sup>[https://www.givingway.com/view\\_review.give?id=c0f3423d-c30f-434e-a4a7-bc5e730632b2](https://www.givingway.com/view_review.give?id=c0f3423d-c30f-434e-a4a7-bc5e730632b2)

*Wealth: "What We Can Be"*

Although volunteers can see their past selves in South Asian childhood simplicity, confronting South Asian economic disparities can cause an initial crisis of difference and confusion. One volunteer felt overwhelmed by the generosity and joy of children living in poverty, sparking a crisis of philosophical questioning: "Reflecting on my life in the West, I felt so rich yet so utterly poor. I asked myself the ultimate and conclusive question, what is rich really? And what is poor?"<sup>60</sup> The volunteer's ability to ponder and produce an elegant and sweeping reflection on poverty rests on her economic privilege. Spurr notes that in colonial discourse "the power to perceive poverty as an aesthetic value is a privilege not granted to the poor."<sup>61</sup> This volunteer abstracts and aestheticizes realities of suffering for the sake of her own self-actualization. She concludes her review with this conviction:

All I ended up with was one foundational understanding: true wealth is internal and comes not from the external world but an inner brightness that does not cease to exist. This wealth inspires love and giving, which is infinite in supply when you sees [sic] little gifts in everything and everyone around you, when you tap into your inevitable connection with others and feel responsible for their well-being just as much as your own. The children of Jamghat have inspired me to always mine for this gold inside of me, and spread this wealth just like they do, because it is infinite and multiplies in strength with each Midas touch. We are only poor when we forget this.<sup>62</sup>

This lesson does resist certain white-savior attributes of colonial discourse by passionately denouncing the volunteer's own selfish materialism and honoring the children of Jamghat instead. Yet the volunteer still participates in colonial discourse by minimizing the independent

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<sup>60</sup>[https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=1&sort\\_bef\\_combine=file\\_review\\_rating\\_overall\\_value%20ASC](https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=1&sort_bef_combine=file_review_rating_overall_value%20ASC)

<sup>61</sup>Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 47.

<sup>62</sup>[https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=1&sort\\_bef\\_combine=file\\_review\\_rating\\_overall\\_value%20ASC](https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=1&sort_bef_combine=file_review_rating_overall_value%20ASC)

identity of the children of Jamghat, reducing them to manifestations of her utopian vision of society. In this volunteer's world, equality and unity already exist; we all only need to recognize it. Every human carries the same unlimited "infinite" potential; poverty is merely an affliction of attitude. Broad realities of social inequality and exploitation as well as individual stories of pain and longing remain unacknowledged for the sake of the beautiful, comforting vision. This vision is an imperialism of philosophy: the volunteer assigns the moral meaning and reaps the moral benefit of the children's reality. In the words of Spurr, "the temptations of the colonizer are both narcissistic and therapeutic. They betray a desire to recreate, in these unconquered territories or in these unsubdued hearts and minds, one's own images, and to reunite the pieces of a cultural identity divided from itself."<sup>63</sup> This volunteer's cultural identity is divided over the unfulfilled promise of happiness from wealth, and she constructs the children of Jamghat as evidence for her new worldview of unity and peace.

*No Excuses: "What We Expect of Others"*

Although colonial and volunteer discourses often relate a monolithic West to a monolithic South Asia, Western debates over ideals and values do sometimes bleed into volunteer reviews. One volunteer who taught monks in Nepal came away with these contentious observations about human character:

In short, meeting these people, eating with them and teaching and living with them has restored my faith in the resolve of human beings and the No Excuses/No get out of jail free/No this pill will fix it clause. They are tough in mind and heart; they have been hit hard but persist. They are no angels, but if you think about what they have been through, what they are still going through and how they [sic] natures and dispositions are still

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<sup>63</sup> Spurr, D. (2004). *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 41.

absolutely beautiful and calm, and you then compare it to what happens in first world countries over silly things, you realize there dam [sic] near close to angels.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps unintentionally, the volunteer who wrote this review references the controversial “No Excuses” movement in American education. Although widely lauded as a method that improves student outcomes, the “No Excuses” movement has been critiqued for obscuring systemic causes of inequality and telling students their success primarily depends on how hard they work.<sup>65</sup> Even if the volunteer does not mean to refer to this particular movement, the “No Excuses” debates encapsulates larger societal divides around meritocracy and the role of the individual in social mobility. In this reflection, “tough” but “calm” Nepalis become the poster children for overcoming profound difficulty with courage and grace. The character of South Asians becomes a weapon for those who fight for meritocracy, often because the ideology absolves them of acknowledging their socioeconomic privilege. These South Asians silently persevere through *real* struggle, not Western “silly things,” a comparison that puts Westerners to shame for even claiming that they face difficulties. This ideology disguises the oppression and exploitation of minorities within Western nations and as such clearly segways into colonial discourse that disguises oppression and exploitation on an international scale. The volunteer returns to the West, the experience having “restored his faith” in his political views, and the South Asian people he lived among end up mere symbolic objects. They are “near close to angels,” creatures who are not capable of any emotions other than bliss and serenity, do not have personal goals or a political consciousness, and do not agitate for social change. In line with the tension in colonial

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<sup>64</sup> Teaching in Monasteries in Nepal: Love Volunteers. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.goabroad.com/providers/love-volunteers/programs/teaching-in-monasteries-in-nepal-101718#listing-reviews>

<sup>65</sup> Lack, B. (2009). No Excuses: A Critique of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) within Charter Schools in the USA. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies (JCEPS)*, 7(2).

discourse of affirming both inclusion and difference, this volunteer's words both welcome and exclude South Asians from broad notions of humanity.

*Tolerance: "What is Expected of Us"*

Although both colonial and volunteer discourse exert significant effort to justify foreign intervention, they each also must explain their own exit or end. At or right after the time of exit, the volunteer processes the experience, balancing the supposed life-changing learning of the time with a return to Western life as before. One volunteer in India relied on a lesson of tolerance to achieve this balance:

This experience has impacted my life because it has confirmed to me that life can be lived in many different ways and be satisfying and happy. The children I served did not have anything, some of them, not even parents. However, they were always happy to see me, to play with me, to enjoy the moment. To be alive. It has made me more respectful of other people, other cultures, other socioeconomical [sic] levels, more respectful and tolerant.<sup>66</sup>

This conclusion does not position itself within colonial discourse at first glance. Cultural pluralism and respect seem antithetical to colonial bigotry. However, her seemingly egalitarian attitude does not actually level the playing field between her and the Indian children. Although she states happiness can be found in many different lifestyles, the happiness among the Indian children she describes comes largely from her ("happy to see *me*, to play with *me*"). She retains at least an aura of white saviorism. Further, her language of respect and tolerance actually creates space for continued structures of privilege and exploitation. This risk is most clearly demonstrated by her respect of "other socioeconomical levels," which translates to a tolerance of poverty and inequality. An attitude of acceptance can absolve her of guilt surrounding her

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<sup>66</sup> Go Overseas: Lucia Merino. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://www.gooverseas.com/interview/alumni/24879>

position of privilege relative to the children she met. Through this philosophy, she can make a significant difference in their lives, but still leave and never interact with them again without any blame.

The particular language of this volunteer's tolerance is still self-oriented and self-serving, much like the British media response to Indian Independence, which marked the official end of British rule. The media praised Britain's supposedly peaceful and magnanimous exit, bouncing between paternalistic narratives of intrinsic Indian inferiority and declarations that colonial rule was intended all along to raise India to self-sufficiency.<sup>67</sup> In all stories, Britain was the hero, publicly choosing to accept India as a new independent nation, without diminishing the economic control sustained through growing private British capital in India.<sup>68</sup> The volunteer similarly recognizes a kind of independence that allows the children to lay no moral or economic claim on her, but does not truly free them from the economic restraints she is complicit in as a Western consumer in a globalized world.

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<sup>67</sup> Kaul, C. (2008). "At the Stroke of the Midnight Hour": Lord Mountbatten and the British Media at Indian Independence. *The Round Table*, 97(398), 677-693, DOI: 10.1080/00358530802340376

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 690.

## **Conclusion: Looking Forward**

Elements of colonial discourse can be found in all the extremes of volunteer expression: in teaching English and learning about themselves, in confidence and uncertainty, in patronizing superiority and “tolerance” for all people, in a volunteer’s arrival in South Asia and their return home. The important opinions and reactions of South Asians themselves remain silenced or subordinate to volunteer voices, as in the colonial discourse that came before. Although this paper has demonstrated the ways colonial mindsets are profoundly entrenched in Western worldviews, volunteer teaching abroad discourse contains a few voices that indicate the potential for the decolonization of voluntourism.

### **Decommodification and Accountability**

Many critics of voluntourism have argued that organizations need to decommodify the industry and the experience, moving beyond a neocolonial development aid model to intercultural mutuality.<sup>69</sup> This paper has complicated this goal by beginning with Pratt’s deconstruction of reciprocity and then problematizing commodification as a mindset that volunteers bring with them. Nonetheless, a process of decommodification begins with holding volunteering organizations accountable for pursuing profit while appearing motivated by altruism. Volunteers are beginning to recognize this inconsistency and demand change, like this volunteer who taught with Rainbow Voluntours in India:

What i definitely didn't like about the organization was where my money went!!! I've payed [sic] 700GBP for 3 weeks Volunteering. [After subtracting expenses that leaves] 407 GBP (41,500 Rs) for the organization. . . The team members of Rainbow Voluntours [sic] were always there to help me. Still I think this amount of money is not at all

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<sup>69</sup> Wearing, S., Young, T., & Everingham, P. (2017). Evaluating volunteer tourism: has it made a difference? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 512–521. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02508281.2017.1345470>

legitimated. Rainbow Volontours bought little things for the children to play - but nothing more for the school!<sup>70</sup>

This volunteer took the time to calculate the cost of all the components of her experience, shocked by the apparent excessive overhead. Even if her calculations are inaccurate, she has an ability to see exploitation apparent in the dichotomy between what she paid and the benefits received by the children. Ideally the volunteer thought not only about how the organization spent her money, but why she chose to spend her money on this trip, thereby holding both the volunteering organization and herself accountable. At the very least she decenters herself by acknowledging the inequality between the high quality service she received and the mediocre investment in the community. In highlighting the organization's superficial lack of integrity, she begins to unveil the deeper lies and inconsistencies in colonial and volunteer discourse.

### **Choosing Social Justice**

One volunteer went beyond critiquing the economic exploitation of a single volunteer organization and reflected in her review on global systems of injustice and inequality. She describes seeing “much poverty and pollution,” describing begging, lack of access to hygiene, and Delhi's thick smog.<sup>71</sup> She recounted her reaction to these observations:

Although viewing these inequities and dire situations people lived in was quite distressing at times, I am grateful to have observed this in India. I am grateful not only because it deepened my understanding of global inequity and disproportionality of wealth in the world, but also strengthened my allegiance to social justice. I know that so much more needs to be done to find and create solutions to this global poverty and pollution. These solutions are something dedicated to being a part of.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Volunteer in India with Volunteering Journeys. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from [https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-journeys/35708?sort\\_bef\\_combine=field\\_review\\_rating\\_overall\\_value%20ASC](https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-journeys/35708?sort_bef_combine=field_review_rating_overall_value%20ASC)

<sup>71</sup> Volunteer in India | Most Affordable Projects Starting From \$250. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020. [https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=4&sort\\_bef\\_combine=field\\_review\\_rating\\_overall\\_value%20ASC](https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=4&sort_bef_combine=field_review_rating_overall_value%20ASC)

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Unlike many volunteers, she arrives in India without confidently claiming to have solutions, but understanding that genuine change is often slow and difficult. She frames inequity and poverty as complex global issues, not blaming India for an exceptional cultural backwardness. She does not seek to primarily learn about herself or philosophize her way to comfort, but dwells in the distress of witnessing the challenges faced by many Indians she met. This distress motivates her to invest in long-term, careful, sustainable change, instead of resorting to scorn and a sense of superiority. She indicates that she already was committed to a worldview of “social justice,” incorporating this experience into broader aims of acknowledging privilege and fairly redistributing opportunities.

This volunteer’s review is not perfect. She still falls into colonial discourse by exoticising historical India and faulting modern India. She describes India as “this ancient place, full with busy traffic and spice aromas,” reveling in the experience of riding an elephant up old palace ruins, but portrays modern Delhi primarily in terms of its “poverty and pollution.”<sup>73</sup> Returning to Nayar’s three moments, the colonial search for *locus amoenus* thrived on the idea of reviving a landscape of ruins, as it “enables the traveller to attribute any and every ‘actual’ or ‘imaginative’ meaning to it, in a ‘metaphorical appropriation’ of the landscape.”<sup>74</sup> Yet even as she creates a rhetorical space for colonial interpretation, appropriation, and intervention, she balances it with actively subordinating her involvement to indigenous practices and visions. She partners with an independent non-profit organization, Bal Umang Drishya Sanstha (BUDS), which has an all-Indian governing board.<sup>75</sup> She quotes their mission and her defined role within it:

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Nayar, P. (2002). The Imperial Sublime: English Travel Writing and India, 1750-1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 64. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/40339521](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339521)

<sup>75</sup> BUDS Our Team. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <http://www.budsngo.org/our-team>

BUDS envisions a society where every child is in school, free from abuse, neglect, child labour and poverty. My role in helping this vision come to fruition at BUDS was to teach the children English, Mathematics, and other healthy life habits along the way. I adored each and every child here at BUDS and put my soul into teaching them all I could each day.<sup>76</sup>

Instead of applying her vision onto her work, she claims the vision of those she is working with, understanding her contribution as a “helping” part, not the single experience needed to change a child’s life. She pours herself into her teaching, not assuming her mere presence is of automatic pedagogic benefit. Critics of voluntourism advocate for this kind of partnership with locally-run NGOs as a deterrent of imperialism.<sup>77</sup>

This volunteer’s experience represents one voice and one particular way a Westerner can interact with South Asia. The evidence in her review of effort to combine prior knowledge of social justice with the volunteer experience indicates that though entirely disentangling colonial and volunteer discourse may be impossible, conscientious, educated volunteers can mitigate their participation in colonial rhetoric and attitudes.

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<sup>76</sup> Volunteer in India | Most Affordable Projects Starting From \$250. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2020. [https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=4&sort\\_bef\\_combine=field\\_review\\_rating\\_overall\\_value%20ASC](https://www.gooverseas.com/volunteer-abroad/india/volunteering-solutions/20937?page=4&sort_bef_combine=field_review_rating_overall_value%20ASC)

<sup>77</sup> Wearing, S., Young, T., & Everingham, P. (2017). Evaluating volunteer tourism: has it made a difference? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 512–521. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02508281.2017.1345470>