

Teaching the Geography of India through Virtual Itineraries

By Thomas Frederick Howard

Like other teachers, I have grown disillusioned with the drawbacks of the undergraduate research paper. The rising tide of plagiarism and the easy availability of papers for sale on the Internet have made vigilance necessary, wearying, and demoralizing. In my Geography and History of South Asia course, I now ask students to create an itinerary for a three-week trip in India instead of a traditional paper. This highly individualized project may engage students more than a traditional paper and reduce the problems mentioned above. It can also make the process of grading and evaluating more interesting for the instructor.

There are many ways to organize a virtual itinerary project. Specifying categories of destinations and then leaving it up to each student to choose a destination of interest within each category makes for a good combination of structure and freedom. Students must explain, in terms they have learned about India in the course readings and classroom discussions, why they chose their destinations and what they would expect to learn by visiting them. At one to two pages per site, the completed virtual itinerary comes to the length of a substantial course paper. Such a project can vary in its importance within a course grading scheme. In my South Asia course, it counts for half of the course grade and is thus a major project. The students receive the assignment early in a fifteen-week semester and work on it as the course proceeds. The completed version is due in the last week. Mid-course correction points can be built in to allow the instructor to monitor student progress, and this means that much of what students submit at the end of the semester will already be familiar to the instructor.

The *Eyewitness Travel Guide to India* is on the reading list for the course, chiefly because it is so lavishly illustrated and can stimulate beginning students to start thinking about the places they want to visit. I emphasize, though, that the assignment will require them to go beyond this travel guide and use other sources of information. Different instructors will come up with different lists of destination categories, depending on the level of preparation and future academic plans of the students. A narrowly focused set of categories might be given

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to upper-division students with a major related to Asian studies. Lower-division students, for whom this course may be a first and only exposure to India, may get a broader range that introduces them to the variety of India's physical and human geography.

My own students have been in the latter category, and my list of destination types, which has evolved with each iteration of the course, tends to be rather broad. Most recently, I used the following categories (giving students an illustrative example for each category in parentheses):

- Hindu temple (Konarak)
- Jain temple (Mount Abu)
- Buddhist site (Bodh Gaya)
- mosque (Jami Masjid)
- Sikh temple (Golden Temple)
- hill station (Shimla)
- palace (Amba Vilas Palace)
- tomb (Tomb of Humayun)
- dance or music performance (kathakali)
- park or wildlife refuge (Periyar Tiger Reserve)
- bazaar or shopping district (Jaipur)
- church (Basilica de Bom Jesus)
- pilgrimage destination (Varanasi)
- museum (Prince of Wales Museum)
- beach (Madras Marina)
- fort (Golconda)

The purpose of the examples is to get students looking around in the guidebook. They are told that they can use the examples if they want, but that the discovery of something different would make a favorable impression.

Not much academic background preparation is assumed. A prerequisite of one or two semesters of a world civilization sequence would be helpful, but it is not necessary. Ideally, the students would go through the readings first and then organize their itineraries on that knowledge base, but if this one-semester course is their only exposure to India, there will not be enough time for this approach. The students must do the reading and develop their itineraries at the same time. Each itinerary must include a map of India that locates the destinations and indicates the order in which they would be visited. This is a geography course, and the spatial element cannot be ignored. Destinations must be ordered in a sequence that can plausibly be completed in the specified time. This requires students to learn something about the Indian railway system, bus service, and internal air travel. Teachable moments appear here, as in the case of the student who blithely assumed he would just rent a car as he might in the US. Easily available YouTube video clips of traffic in India convinced the class that renting a car without hiring an Indian driver would not be a good idea. The time of year is another practicality that enters in here. The annual cycle of the monsoon climate is covered early in the course, and students are encouraged to consider this.

Even more so than with conventional papers, it is important to establish in-course correction points and not to let students go off on their own for the entire semester and hand in something completely unchecked at the end. These are at least two ways that students commonly go astray that need to be corrected earlier rather than later. One potential problem is simply inadequate or lazy ac-

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counts of destinations. For example, if students pick the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai to fulfill the Hindu temple or pilgrimage destination category, some will say that they made this choice because they expect the visit to provide an “awesome” or “amazing” experience of popular Hinduism today and not get much beyond that. This provides an opportunity to establish expectations for more substantial responses. In this example, students might be guided toward learning something about south Indian temple architecture, the multiple social uses of a large temple complex, or the way regional deities have been assimilated to the all-India Hindu pantheon, to name only three possibilities. Other students may wander off and waste time because of the command many of them now have of graphics and publishing software. This allows them to hand in nicely illustrated and laid-out pages that make a good first impression but then turn out to be rather skimpy on substance. Attempts to create an illustrated product need not be discouraged, but students must understand that flashy graphics and layout do not substitute for written content. It may help to tell the class at the beginning that they can produce an A-earning itinerary without any illustrations except the map.

The instructor will have to decide whether to make food and lodging part of the exercise. Some students are drawn to this aspect of travel, and they will spontaneously include hotels and restaurants at different destinations. This can be educational, but can also be a distraction. The same applies to the question of a travel budget. Setting a limit on allowable expenditures might be stimulating and made part of a discussion of the economics of everyday life in India, but students also can get distracted by ticket prices, room rates, and meal costs and give insufficient attention to the substance of the sites they want to visit.

Enough has probably been said here to make clear the great variability of a course exercise like this. Much will depend on the level of the students and on the interests of the instructor. The key to making it an interesting exercise for all is getting the right balance of constraints and freedom. Educational goals will require some constraints. In addition to the list of required destination types, students may also be given a geographical breadth requirement, travel in both south and north India, for example, or a requirement to visit a certain minimum number of states.

Assessment criteria are up to the instructor, of course, but a couple of things might be said. The choice of sites to visit is less important than explanation of those sites for course readings. Incorrect site choices can be identified and changed early, but in cases where the student's choice is acceptable but not the best possible, in the instructor's opinion, it might be better to let the student use it anyway.

Finally, there are rewards of discovery for the instructor as well as the student. India is a vast country, and it is likely that students will come up with places that the instructor is only dimly aware or perhaps has not heard of at all. For me, the cluster of hilltop Jain temples at Palitana in Gujarat was something of a surprise, as were the Theyyam dances of northern Kerala. I had not realized that there is an important Sikh temple far to the south of Punjab, in Nanded, Maharashtra, nor had I heard of the Nellapattu Bird Sanctuary along the Andhra coast. The Anglican cathedral at Medak was quite unknown to me until one student came up with it. In this way, student itineraries can offer an element of the unexpected that traditional course papers usually do not. ■

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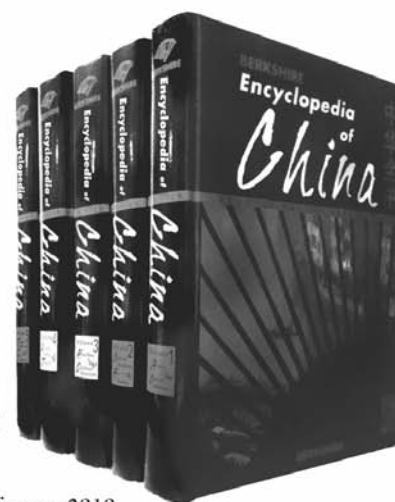
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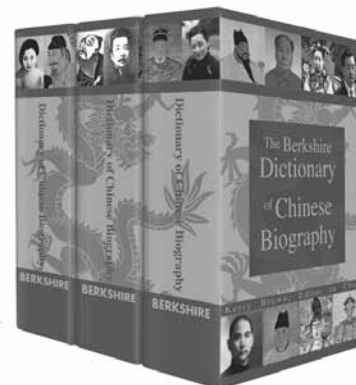
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