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## Reawakening in Bundelkhand: Cultural Identity in Orchha and the Effects of Tourism on its Creation, Preservation, and Loss

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## Introduction

The citadel island of the medieval Bundela rulers is situated on the Betwa River. The Bundela kings began building the town of Orchha, also known as the heart of Bundelkhand,<sup>1</sup> in 1531. Surrounded by forest and mountains, Orchha is a place of great natural beauty as well as a place of history and culture. The remains of great palaces, walls, temples, memorials, and the art contained within them appear as impressive today as in the past. As well as architecture and history, Orchha has a rich tradition of religion, myth, and poetry. It is a place of pilgrims, being home to the only temple in the world in which Lord Ram is worshipped as *Raja*<sup>2</sup> (Rothfarb 2012) and the site of the shrine of Hardaul (a Bundela royal who has a cult in his name). Innumerable myths surround the shrines, monuments, and natural features that dot the landscape in and around the town.

This entire heritage has an influence on the cultural identity of Orchhans today. This identity draws not only from the medieval past of the Bundelas, but also from their religion, the myths that surround the town, and the work of the great poets that have lived in Orchha. The architectural remains of the Bundelas bring about pride, and some of the local people still draw ancestral ties to the former rulers. Although there have been Islamic influences, Orchha has always been a place primarily of Hindus. Evidence of this is present in the several large temples and many small shrines located in and around the town. The traditions of myth and poetry are still alive as well; there are many stories about the streams, hills, ruins, monuments, and bridges, giving a sense of an imagined mythic landscape that is commonly known among the Orchhans today.

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<sup>1</sup> larger geographic region in which Orchha is contained

<sup>2</sup> king

It is no surprise that with all of Orchha's history, manmade extravagance, and natural beauty, it has become a site that is visited by people from all around the world. The result of this influx of visitors has been a city transforming from a quiet pilgrimage site of a few hundred people to a rapidly expanding tourist town of over 8,000 residents in a matter of only 20 years. Tourism is growing throughout India and this can have major socio-cultural repercussions. According to the Indian ministry of tourism, foreign tourist visits have increased from 5.5 to 20 million, and domestic tourist visits from 160 to 1,150 million between 1997 and 2013 (Ministry of Tourism 2015). Understanding how this is shaping the country's new growth and the potential drawbacks that may come along with it make this a beneficial topic of study.

This rise in tourism has caused a shift in the identity of Orchha, with the creation of new social and economic opportunities. It promotes an increased attention to heritage and its preservation; however, it also has potential to be responsible for loss of Orchha's unique identity. Tourism can have the consequence of homogenizing and commodifying cultures and damaging natural environments and resources. An acute example of this is when one site or art form is preserved while another is neglected. These contrasting processes are being played out in Orchha today with intriguing results. These effects of tourism and the partnering consequences could be applied not only to Orchha but also to any culture of the world that is feeling the changes of modernity.

This study has two primary goals: 1) to give an overview of the history and culture of Orchha, and 2) to look specifically at how tourism has influenced the creation, preservation, and loss of cultural identity, mainly in the past 20 years. These two goals complement each other as well as stand on their own. The overview of the history and culture of Orchha will provide historical context to the past 20 years. The second will add to the broader literature on the cycle

of cultural identity by using this city as a specific example to examine the role tourism can play in influencing culture.

The study was done using both historical and ethnographic approaches. It is fundamentally based on work conducted on site in Orchha. The fieldwork was conducted in a 29-day span on location in Orchha and involved participant observation among local business owners, shopkeepers, hotel wait staff, tourists, and people contracted by the Madhya Pradesh Archaeological Survey. Archival materials are used for the historical perspective, as well as to add validity to the claims about the present that reference and draw from related cultural materials and scholarly works.

### **Roots of Cultural Identity in Orchha**

The city of Orchha today has a unique cultural identity, an identity that is drawn from the history of the Bundela Empire that ruled there, and also from the long history of religious and folk traditions of the people. Before looking at the role of tourism in the present day, it is important to understand the culture and history that it influences.

#### **Brief History of the Bundela's Rule in Orchha**

*Raja Rudra Pratap* (1501-31) established Orchha as the second capital of the Bundela Empire in 1531 C.E., leaving the previous capital Garhkundar, which lies 28 kilometers east of Orchha, abandoned. Rudra Pratap encountered the site for his future capital while on a hunting trip (Dubey 1997). The cause for this shift of capitals is likely a product of the formation of the Mughal Empire under Babur (1525-1530). The temporary instability of powers to the north allowed the Bundelas to claim a larger swath of territory on the north-south trade routes of India. However, it would not be long before the Mughal Empire would begin to turn their attention to the Bundelas and Orchha. Rudra Pratap is said to have been killed while protecting a cow from a

tiger only months after founding Orchha, leaving his son, Bharati Chand (1531-54), and later, Madhukar Shah (1554-92), to rule successfully for a time (Sharma, Sharma 2006). The Mughal Empire, now under Akbar (1556-1605), invaded the Bundela's territory on their conquest deeper into India. The land around Orchha was a strong point strategically for the Bundelas, and they fended off the Mughals until Madhukar Shah's death in 1592 during a Bundela retreat from the Mughals (Rothfarb 2012).

The empire went into temporary decline under the rule of Madhukar's son Ram Shah (1592-1605). Ram Shah, as well as being subordinate to the Mughals, had trouble coping with the rebellious activity of some of his brothers. Ram Shah was replaced on the throne by Bir Singh as a result of a deal struck between Bir Singh (1605-27) and future Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605-27). Bir Singh's rule was arguably the most prosperous reign of any Bundela ruler; he established a balance between having control of his own empire while still being *badshahi*<sup>3</sup> and allying with the Mughals (Sharma, Sharma 2006).

Bir Singh was followed by Jujhar Singh (1627-34). Jujhar was constantly at odds with the Mughal ruler of his time, Shahjehan (b.1592, d.1666), due to Jujhar's rebellious activity in the past. Shahjehan eventually ended his rule in 1634 after Jujhar withheld treasure from a conquest against the Mughals' enemies, the Gonds. Shahjehan then placed Devi Singh on the throne in Orchha (1634-36). However, on a visit to Orchha Shahjehan became jealous of Devi Singh's architecture and deposed him and torched many buildings. The next several rulers of Orchha maintained good connections with the Mughals and fought alongside them on many campaigns. As the Mughals grew weaker, they were finally removed from Bundelkhand in events that coincided with the move of the Bundela's capital to Tikamgarh in 1783. Orchha was still ruled

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<sup>3</sup> loyal to the Mughal Empire

by lesser Bundela royals, and in 1812, a treaty was signed with the British, establishing the primarily good relations they would have until the independence of India in 1947. Following independence, the Bundela lost much of their land and power in Orchha (Sharma, Sharma 2006). The tales of these kings are still remembered today and are thought of as a living history that has shaped the development of Orchha over the years.

### **The Architecture of the Bundelas**

The architectural remains of the Bundelas are a clear sign of their historical presence, their connection with the Mughals, and the impact they had on the area. The most notable buildings are the palaces. The Raja Mahal was used as the main palace of the Bundelas for many years. Some of the notable features of the palace are the paintings on the ceilings of the king's and the queen's chambers, which feature each of Vishnu's ten avatars. This shows the devotion of the rulers and also the particular importance of Vishnu in Orchha. Next to the Raja Mahal stands the Jahangir Mahal, which was built by Bir Singh as a gift to the Mughal emperor, although it is unclear if Jahangir ever spent any time there. The Jahangir Mahal is somewhat more extravagant in appearance than the Raja Mahal and fully illustrates the mixing of Islamic and Indic styles. The palace features *jalīs*, ribbed domes, canopies, turquoise roof tiles, and paintings featuring *Krishna*, *Radha*, and the *gopīs*. Also located on the citadel island is a Mughal style bathhouse or *hammam*. The Rai Praveen Mahal, a smaller palace with its own *bagh* or garden, is similar to Mughal design but does not completely adhere to the traditional *charbagh*<sup>4</sup> style that was being built in Agra or Delhi at the time. Both of these show the mix of influences in the architectural patronage of the Bundelas (Rothfarb 2012). These buildings, and others like

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<sup>4</sup> garden designed with four squares

them, demonstrate that Orchha has always been an example of the sort of architecture that represents India's national identity and pride.

### **Myth and Poetry**

A common use of myth in many cultures is to track descent; myth in Orchha is also used as a way to record descent or genealogies, called *Vamshavali*. These myths explain the origins of the Bundelas' ancestors and their right to power. For example, in common fashion for a Hindu kingdom, the Bundelas trace descent back to the gods themselves, starting from Vishnu's placenta in the form of the lotus flower, through many divine beings, and branching off to mortality with Ram and his son Kusa. This is indicative of the importance Ram holds in Orchha.

Many myths are more identifiable to the common people as examples of an obtainable level of heroism or telling a cautionary tale. One tale tells of a great horseman, who in order to display his galloping skill, pledged to run the circumference of Orchha, a ride of twenty-four miles. He claimed he could finish the trip in six hours; however, he completed the trip in only five. Upon returning to the starting point, the horse collapsed, and the horseman fell to the ground; both died of exhaustion on the spot. In memory of the horseman's act, a cenotaph was built in his honor (Dubey 1997). Clearly, this shows that there is respect for such a display of athleticism, but perhaps the reason the story is still passed on is as a warning to misplaced heroism. Other myths serve to explain the unknown. When travelers started disappearing on the road from the east, it was suspected to be the work of ghosts: perhaps, the myth asserts, the ghost of a woman and her son who had committed suicide by jumping into a nearby well after her husband's death. This story gained validity in the eyes of the people when two holy men reported going to this place and freeing the ghosts (Dubey 1997).

Orchha has a long tradition of great poets. One of the earliest poets, Hari Ram Vyasa, was born in 1510 and was a devout Krishna<sup>5</sup> worshipper. Much of his work focused on the romance of Krishna and Radha. Keshav Das was one of the most famous Hindi poets of all time (Sharma, Sharma 2006). Born to a Brahmin family in Orchha in 1546, he learned to write and compose poetry from an early age, and his most popular works include *Rasik Priya*, *Kavya Priya*, and *Ramchandrika*, an epic influenced by Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Dubey 1997). Because of his work, his contemporaries gave him the title Bhawan, which is a title bestowed upon the greatest poets. His father acted as advisor and teacher to the royal family, and later, he would also have close ties to the royal family as an advisor and teacher to Bir Singh. He wrote many poetic accounts of current events, which are some of the key sources on the history of Bir Singh's rule (Busch 2011). One of Keshav Das's most notable students is the royal lady, Rai Praveen. Rai Praveen was known for her great singing voice, her skill as a dancer, and her poetry. Her fame was widespread and she was even invited by Akbar to perform her poetry in his court (Dubey 1997). The works of these poets, as well as other more recent compositions, are still found in small booklets in the Orchha market today.

### **Creation of a New Cultural Identity in Orchha**

Cultural identity is constantly shifting due to internal and external influences. In the case of Orchha, the biggest influence on cultural identity in the past 20 years is the increase of tourism. Tourism has caused a new identity to emerge, an identity that has an audience for its heritage and pride; a reawakening of the past--as the locals have more cause to look back at their own history and realize it holds importance to people beyond Orchha itself.

### **A Larger Trend**

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<sup>5</sup> eighth avatar of Vishnu

The increase of tourism in Orchha is a product of the increase of tourism throughout India. As mentioned earlier, both the number of international and the number of domestic tourists has risen drastically in recent years. India has become increasingly accessible to international tourists, in part because of a recent movement in India toward 'rediscovering' its heritage; Indians are realizing that the valuable history they already know they possess is now considered important to the rest of the world. Likely this is associated with the nationalism movements that have continued to be influential even past independence. Within India, the increase of domestic tourism can be explained by the swelling of the middle class, which renders more Indians able to afford travel and vacation. Orchha is simply a specific example of how this has played out.

### **Twenty Years of Growth**

A local farmer of 22 years, who works at a hotel in Orchha to supplement his earnings, described to me how Orchha was at the time of his birth, with a population of 150-200 people and only 15-20 houses standing in town. Today, the population of Orchha is over 8000, with many more homes, hotels, restaurants, and tourist shops. In contrast to Orchha, another site in Madhya Pradesh, at one time completely abandoned, is today a world heritage site. Khajuraho is more developed as a city today while many signs of continuing development can still be seen in Orchha. Khajuraho draws a larger audience due primarily to its temples, which are of much greater age than those in Orchha. The city, having its own airport, is also further along in its development in contrast to Orchha, where few passenger trains arrive and visitors must instead come by way of nearby Jhansi. The first hotel in Orchha was built just 20 years ago, and new hotels are still being built today. Despite the smaller size, Orchha has moved beyond a small pilgrimage town and created job and business opportunities for the local community as well for people moving into the area looking for the same.

### **Newcomers**

Orchha could be divided into two groups: those whose families lived in or around Orchha for many years, and those who arrived sometime in the past twenty years from another city, most often nearby Jhansi. A causal distinction can be made that the more recent arrivals are more often the owners of hotels and small businesses, while the long time Orchhans are from the farms in the surrounding area and have moved or commute to Orchha in order to supplement their earnings with tourism-related work. There are certainly many exceptions, including highly regarded families with long histories in Orchha, and newcomers who hit hard times and were forced to move on. It seems logical that people moving into Orchha from elsewhere would do so with some financial backing to start a business and a new life. Less of a distinction however, is the pride that each group has in their town. With few exceptions, people who have lived in Orchha for ten years or fewer have gained pride for their adopted homes. The interest these newcomers have in learning about the town's heritage and making it a part of their own is certainly positive for the outlook of Orchha.

### **Recreating the Past**

The previous points pertain primarily to the creation of cultural identity based on economic growth. However, there is also creation on a less visible level. This creation pertains to the discovery that what Orchha has to offer is worth protecting and sharing with the world. Therefore, in a sense, it is a re-creation. Certainly, Orchhans had respect for their heritage previous to this tourism boom; however, the last 20 years have caused them to reflect more deeply on their own identity. Seeing people eager to travel so far to witness their heritage has perhaps sparked the creation of Orchha's new identity as more than a mysterious and storied place by the river, but as a representation to the world of what India of the past was like.

Nationalism is hard to ignore in this conversation and it is surely involved in this renewed pride in heritage and everything it represents.

### **Preservation of Cultural Identity in Orchha**

The preservation of cultural identity is very closely tied with its creation. In Orchha, the creation of identity is very much about tourism and economic factors, but it is also about a rediscovery of heritage. This rediscovery has resulted in a strong movement towards preserving what the town has to offer. Visitors, the tourism industry, archaeologists, locals, and the ancestors of the ruling families themselves have taken on this cause, each with their own unique contributions.

#### **Monumental Attraction**

Before getting into who works to preserve Orchha from within, it is important to talk about the visitors who help to both make preservation an easier and more lucrative process for the inhabitants, and to preserve Orchha in a different way. All tourists come to Orchha with some degree of interest in the medieval history of the place, whether that interest is in gaining a deep understanding of the history of India, to imagine what life would have been like during the time of Bir Singh, or simply to take in the impressive examples of architecture from a less active mindset (although this last example can have a downside as well which I will discuss later). All these examples of a visitor's thought processes can lead to the preservation of Orchha's identity. All visitors give the clear benefit of making Orchha the tourist destination it is; this encourages the government and other entities to invest in protecting historic sites and places importance on keeping Orchha as it is. On a different level, any visitor who attempts to actively engage with the history and culture of Orchha is helping to both preserve these things in their own mind and to pass them on to the outside world. In this way, by having genuine interest in the complexities of

a site or culture, visitors help to keep the local identity intact rather than bring in outside biases and improperly promote or disrespect the locality.

### **Government Interest in Preservation**

The government of Madhya Pradesh assists in preservation in Orchha in two ways: through their tourism department and through their archaeology department. The tourism department, in addition to promoting Orchha in their travel information, also takes a more direct approach. The Madhya Pradesh Tourism Department is involved in running two hotels in Orchha. One of these, the Sheesh Mahal, is particularly interesting. The Sheesh Mahal stands between the Jahangir Mahal and the Raja Mahal. It was built by Udait Singh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as his personal rest house and was later renovated for European visitors (Sharma, Sharma 2006). It has been taken over by the tourism department to be used as a hotel and restaurant. It is a common trend in India for old palaces to be given second use as hotels. This both directly preserves the Sheesh Mahal and creates room for more visitors coming to the other sites of Orchha. The Madhya Pradesh Department of Archaeology is responsible for protecting all the historical sites in Orchha. They hire attendants to be on site to take tickets and stop vandalism, and they hire contractors to complete restoration projects on the sites. The restoration projects are intended to protect the buildings from natural damage, to show them in their original state, and, by leaving some sections untouched, to show their antiquity. It seems practical for the government to invest in these actions, as they contribute to their own revenue by drawing tourists and growing the economy while protecting their own heritage.

### **Heritage of Kings**

One year after independence, in 1947, the princely states of India were essentially disbanded. The majority of the Rajput's power was taken away, and they were left with a

fraction of their previous land holdings. However, these families still hold their titles and have taken to a variety of pursuits. The present head of what remains of the Bundela royal family constructed a hotel on land he owns in Orchha. This action was not only a profit-making venture, but was also in line with a tradition of royal families to uphold cultural heritage.

I met another such royal in Orchha. He had taken the role of foreman for a restoration of the Kothi ruins by the Madhya Pradesh Archeological Survey. The Kothi Ruins are a collection of buildings, located within the citadel walls in Orchha, that housed support staff to the Bundela Empire: from ministers of the king, to masons, and the manager of roads. This man belongs to another Rajput<sup>6</sup> family who currently holds land near Gwalior, 123 km northwest of Orchha. He also assisted in another recent restoration completed at the Ram Raja Mandir. This man seemed to take great pride in his work and in particular the fact that they were using a finish for the ruins that would have been used at the time of construction. He pointed out the grinding of the materials, lime and calcium carbonate, explaining the process with enthusiasm. This enthusiasm seems to be the driving force for these men; it is also part of the motivation for the local people who are not from a royal background.

### **The Local Role**

While I do not want to downplay the role that the residents have in the preservation of historic sites and in welcoming visitors, they do these things in a manner that overlaps with the tourism industry and the government. What they do more exclusively, however, is keep the folk culture alive. Whether it is the local art forms or the myths and legends, it is the community that will preserve these things foremost. While archaeologists and academics may have interest in learning the historical truth as well as the meaning behind myth and legend, it is the locals who

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<sup>6</sup> broad term used to describe an Indian princely state

will keep these things integrated into the living culture. In Orchha, you will find farmers, waiters, shopkeepers, and priests, all of whom are in touch with the mythology that surrounds the town. They are aware of why each site is important, and, if asked, are always eager to divulge. There are also people who have taken on what could be considered specialist roles, mainly tour guides and a few local writers. While profit is a part of these endeavors, these individuals still contribute substantially towards actively compiling this information and preserving these details simply by memory or by the pen.

### **Loss of Cultural Identity in Orchha**

There is another side to the development of tourism, and that is the negative socio-cultural implications. Among these are the commodification and homogenization of culture, and staged authenticity. Orchha currently has only a few examples of each of these issues, but it is important to note where they are in order to make adjustments to them and to be aware of related issues that may arise in the future.

#### **Commodification and Homogenization of Culture**

When an area begins to gain monetary value as a tourist destination, the demand for souvenirs, art, and entertainment can cause fundamental changes to human values. Once sacred and respected sites and objects can now lose value as anything more than a trade good. For example, restaurants will begin to cater to a tourist taste, which often involves a slightly exotic but mainly familiar menu selection. This can restrict the restaurants from serving more regional and less common dishes in favor of a more typical ethnic fare. This is seen in Orchha; the majority of restaurants serve the same basic set of Indian dishes, those that have pleased their guests reliably in the past. Restaurant owners should do what is best for their business; however, the instance remains where local dishes, of which Orchha has a few, can be cast aside from the menus. These dishes may still be cooked in private homes, but over time they may disappear

from family tables also. Another example is that of souvenir items. Orchha has a tradition of brick etchings, examples of which can be seen in some of Orchha's more recent buildings. However, artwork of this type is difficult to find for purchase, even though the tradition is still alive. Instead, in the market tourist shops, you will find much of the same as you would find in any tourist spot in India--the items that are already tested in the market and shown to be successful. In both of these examples, we see first something gaining value, then we see it adapted to retain that value, and once adapted, the genuine nature of the thing is lost.

### **Staged Authenticity**

Staged authenticity is the idea that elements of a culture are presented in a false or modified manner. The reason for this is often to play up certain things to make them more desirable for tourists. Perhaps the only place this is seen clearly in Orchha is in the case of tour guides. As I talked about in the previous section, tour guides can serve an important role as specialists in preserving and passing on culture orally. However, since they do have some control over knowledge, they can do harm as well. For example, this happens when guides present a historical site with embellished details. They often try to make the site seem more interesting, but also are known for over-simplifying for easier consumption. One case of this is the inaptly named camel house at the entrance of the Jahangir Mahal. It was given the name "the camel house" by guides trying to make their talk seem more understandable and entertaining. In reality, the high archways and large spaces of the structure indicate that it was actually most likely a performance venue or courtly meeting-place. Another example is in the mixed Indo and Islamic styles of the Jahangir Mahal. In order to accentuate their point that the styles are mixed, the guides will point out the turquoise roof tiles and tell how there were once green ones as well, and that the green represented the Islamic and the blue the Indic. The reasoning behind this is that

these are the national colors of Pakistan and India. There are several reasons this representation is inaccurate, primarily the fact that there never were green tiles on the roof, and the turquoise tiles are originally an Islamic style. Beyond that, these colors only gained relevance to the two modern day nation states post-independence; they have no such association in a time when the politics of the region were not so black and white, or rather, green and blue. These may seem like harmless trivial details, but the mentality can be harmful. It ushers in a loss of respect for the truth and allows a false view to become the norm. Not to say that this is malicious or always-intentional behavior by the guides, it is often the case that a guide will simply be uninformed and pass on their own speculation or something they heard from someone else before them. This issue has no clear fix—it is not the fault of one group—but it is a larger cultural shift, and perhaps it will continue for the worse. However, the least that can be done is to acknowledge that these processes of loss may be taking place, so they can be explored further to help understand how to protect the roots from which today's identity has sprung.

### **Final Thoughts**

When examining how members of a culture identify themselves, Orchha proved to be an excellent example of how broad the influences on the members of a culture can be. Orchha is shaped by its medieval past, by its myth and poetry, by outside influences such as the Mughals and the British, by tourism, and by globalization in modernity. This spectrum of influence made Orchha useful for this short project while maintaining an end result that is focused and cohesive. Because this study touches on so many different components of culture, it is applicable to a broad range of future studies. The three-pronged approach of creation, preservation, and loss was also intended to make the study more broadly relevant by using Orchha as an example of how these processes play out. These processes affect all cultures, and if we work to understand how

culture changes when faced with new influences such as tourism, we can more assuredly move forward in a positive direction, more aware of how to preserve what matters and cast off what holds us down.

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