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The Art of Interpretation

Learning objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to understand:

- The nature of interpretation for tour guides
- The characteristics of a powerful interpretation
- The TORE model of interpretation
- The techniques of interpretation

As we often say, tourism is no longer about seeing a place – it is about experiencing it. Tourists like to have a feel of the place and get immersed. Naturally, they would like to understand, especially when travelling to a very different place. However, they often fail to make sense of animate and inanimate elements of this alien space. For a long time, tour guides have been providing hordes of monotonous information about monuments and places, making it difficult for the tourists to appreciate and therefore connect to the object, the event or the activity.

Tour guides are expected to put meaning to the place they show around. They are, therefore, also *interpreters*. This approach has dictated a change in their roles as well. Information and interpretation are not the same things. Information is simple straight facts and figures presented to the visitors, whereas interpretation adds meaning to the information. According to John Veverka and Associates, “visitors travel to see, experience and learn (edutainment) about natural or cultural landscapes, sites, features, objects, people, events and stories. It needs to be noted here that the educational component (learning and connecting) of this type of tourism is the key aspect. Visitors want to learn, see, and do! They travel to sites for a mix of edutainment experiences.” (Veverka, n.d.)

Interpretation

Interpretation is not about translating information from one language to another. According to Dr Sam H. Ham, each audience will eventually develop their understanding of the subject and, therefore, will interpret it differently. Therefore, professional interpretation by guides is a process of provoking audiences to think. The job of a guide is to engage visitors through their storytelling so that they are hooked and make conscious efforts to construe the meaning.

Interpretation communicates what is noteworthy about places, people or events – why they are appreciated? It is a celebration of place and things, culture and nature, creativity and folklore, great successes and failures in history. Interpretation is connected to sites and objects, artwork or living things, and it can happen anywhere; in parks, visitor centres, historic sites, city streets, museums, zoos or galleries, at special events or promotions, and in publications (Colquhoun, 2005). Interpretation, therefore, is a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage to visitors through first-hand experiences with objects, artefacts, landscapes, and sites.

Example of interpretation:

Fact: Plants and animals are worshipped in India

Interpretation: This is the Indian way of appreciating nature; due importance has been associated with plants, animals, and other ecosystem constituents to be venerated, preserved, and protected.

Characteristics of a powerful interpretation

The eyes are a window that leads to the mind. They focus on what is at the centre of a person's visual attention. However, the visual stimulus becomes information when associated with a cognitive process. Starting with a view, the visitor tries to gaze. To gaze, he/ she tries to add meaning to what is visually available. This is called the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990). A tourist's desires to visit places and the ways we learn to appreciate them visually are not merely individual and independent – they are culturally mediated and socially organised. Tourists depend on visual and narrative depictions to make sense of the place. This sense-making is called interpretation. In simple terms, the tourist experience of a place involves a particular way of seeing. He wants to add meaning to what he sees. The visitor needs assistance to interpret the place and its elements. Assisted mediation builds narratives about the uniqueness of their history, culture and heritage, and varieties of performative practices help the tourists articulate experiences.