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Travel as Qualitative Method: Medard Boss' Sojourn to India and Its Contemporary Relevance for Cultural and Consciousness Research

This paper explores the relevance of the noted existential psychiatrist Medard Boss' *A Psychiatrist Discovers India* for contemporary psychological research and practice in a globalized world. More than fifty years after his journey, the work, while given much less attention than his other writings, still remains as relevant as it was then, and as important as it was to Boss himself. It documented his attempt to find in India a more sophisticated understanding of humanity than the one he found in Western psychology, which he felt held "a totally ruthless attitude towards the particular nature of man." Aside from the remarkable outcomes of his spiritual and scientific journey, I argue that the text is actually a peak inside the beginnings of a new paradigm for research on consciousness and culture: Experiential travel and cultural immersion as qualitative method for Psychology. To further illustrate this burgeoning paradigm, the paper will present and attempt to clarify the extraordinarily complex qualitative methods found in Boss' text, including: phenomenology; ethnography; psychoanalytic clinical research method; dialectical method; engagement with ancient Indian texts; dream analysis; art critique; participatory learning; use of key informants and in-depth interviews; and Boss' own evolving and expanding experiential process captured as a travelogue. The following sections will briefly outline the above methodological genius found in Boss' text, italicizing key moments of the research process.

Boss began his quest as with any research project: Seeking to *close a gap in knowledge*, that is, to search for answers to questions that he felt Western psychology could not yet answer, relating to "first premisses" (p. 11). and foundational questions like: "Why is there being rather than nothingness?" (p. 11). Lacking an adequate understanding of these matters, Boss felt, among other things, that his own psychotherapeutic methods were ultimately lacking. He then *read widely on the literature* of the Indian wisdom traditions and felt they had possibly reached a fuller understanding of the questions that had plagued him and his patients. However, he ultimately felt that his Eastern readings were already filtered through traditional Western frameworks and "imprisoned" (p. 14) by them. His solution? *Go to the things themselves*, "on the spot, in India itself" (p. 14).

Boss' *fieldwork* and *clinical work* in India bore much fruit. In addition to his far from simple quest for an understanding of the very nature of humanity, Boss took the time to record numerous *ethnographic and cultural observations* of Indian society, family life, social norms, and everyday practices. We are left with a complex portrait of Indian life of the 20th century. In fact, this was the time when large groups of Indians first immigrated to the United States, meaning

that Boss' work gives us an excellent view of the culture that they encapsulated and brought with them. In other words, Boss gave thorough descriptions of still-relevant issues of the modern Indian Diaspora. These include: caste, gender roles, sexuality and sexual minorities, patriarchy/matriarchy, politics of skin complexion, high status given to doctors, professional pressures placed on Indian youth, vocational focus on natural science careers in post-colonial society, and even an early take on the potential Westernization of mental illness (p. 87).

The rest of the text includes critical engagements with great Indian teachers. Far from romanticized worship of exotic others, Boss and his Indian interlocutors exchanged quite intense debates, a type of *dialectical method* concerning the "subjectivity of the subject, the personality of the person and the consciousness of the mind" (p. 10). At one point, Boss self-reflexively came to the recognition that one of his Indian interlocutors had essentially outlined Heidegger's philosophy and Boss' Daseinsanalysis, but that these were understood to be "mere preliminary stages" (p. 128) for an even greater illumination of existence. Boss found this greater illumination through the three-fold ancient Indian term *sat-chit-ananda*, which perhaps better disclosed the "ultimate reality" for which he was seeking. In the end, Boss left with a different sense of knowledge, one that is silently and experientially understood (p. 165). Boss noted that, "It was not a knowledge of this and that, but one that revealed the peripheral character of all questioning and in a thoroughly gratifying way silently quenched it" (p. 165).

Overall, travel to the East with hopes of expanding one's consciousness is nothing new, but rarer are the occasions when a great thinker from the West so carefully attempted to understand and describe Eastern wisdom traditions from the very manner in which they reveal themselves from themselves. Such is the profound gift that Medard Boss provided in *A Psychiatrist Discovers India*.