

Exploring the Shadows: Dark Tourism in India

Goyal J¹, Gaurav K^{2*}

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.14840434

¹ Jigisha Goyal, MBA Candidate, WPU School of Business, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.^{2*} Kunal Gaurav, Professor, WPU School of Business, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.

Dark tourism, an emerging niche in India's travel landscape, offers a unique exploration of sites marked by history's tragedies and mysteries. This form of tourism invites travelers to engage with the stories of resilience, loss, and humanity's complex relationship with mortality. From the haunting silence of Jallianwala Bagh to the ghostly allure of Bhangarh Fort, these destinations challenge visitors to reflect on the past and its enduring impact on identity and culture. India's vast and diverse history makes it a fertile ground for this growing segment, providing not only emotional and educational experiences but also opportunities to preserve heritage and foster deeper connections with history.

Despite its potential, dark tourism raises critical ethical, sustainability, and social considerations. Questions about respecting the memories of those affected, balancing commercialization with authenticity, and the equitable distribution of economic benefits remain significant challenges. By addressing these concerns, dark tourism can evolve into a meaningful form of travel that honors the lessons of the past while enriching the travel experience. As India's tourism industry continues to expand, integrating dark tourism thoughtfully can diversify offerings and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the nation's multifaceted history.

Keywords: Dark Tourism, Tragedy Tourism, Memory Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Historical Narratives

Corresponding Author	How to Cite this Article	To Browse
Kunal Gaurav, Professor, WPU School of Business, Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, Maharashtra, India. Email: kunal.gaurav@mitwpu.edu.in	Goyal J, Gaurav K, Exploring the Shadows: Dark Tourism in India. <i>int. j. eng. mgmt. res.</i> 2025;15(1):6-12. Available From https://ijemr.vandanapublications.com/index.php/j/article/view/1690	

Manuscript Received
2025-01-01Review Round 1
2025-01-18

Review Round 2

Review Round 3

Accepted
2025-02-05Conflict of Interest
NoneFunding
NilEthical Approval
YesPlagiarism X-checker
2.55

Note



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1. Introduction

India, a land renowned for its kaleidoscope of colors, flavors, and traditions, holds a lesser-known yet intriguing facet that beckons the curious traveler. Travel is often portrayed in vivid hues, with towns shimmering in cultural splendor, golden beaches inviting relaxation, and verdant forests teeming with life. However, beyond this vibrant facade lies another realm—a shadowy side adorned with historical echoes and mysteries, waiting to be uncovered.

Dark tourism, the practice of visiting sites steeped in history's tragedies and enigmas, is not driven by morbid fascination. Instead, it is an exploration of stories that persist through time, defying oblivion. In India, where every corner hums with tales of life and light, a hidden dimension quietly calls out to the inquisitive and the brave. This form of travel does not seek to entertain but to provoke thought, challenge perspectives, and stir emotions buried deep within.

From haunted mountain passes to the infamous Cursed Fortresses, these destinations reveal more than eerie legends—they delve into the meaning of remembrance and the scars that shape cultural identity. Dark tourism encourages a deeper understanding of history by confronting pain and tragedy, offering profound insights into the legacies they leave behind.

This journey is far from the typical travel itinerary. It ventures beyond picture-perfect postcards to uncover the layered narratives that define India's past and present. Every site offers a lesson, every tragedy carries a legacy, and every story deserves to be told. Through these shadows, one may discover not only the darkness but also the light that emerges from understanding it.

2. Dark Tourism in India – An Overview

India's dark tourism sector is a vibrant tapestry, weaving together its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and historical depth. In 2024, the travel and tourism industry contributed approximately 9.1% to the nation's GDP, equating to over \$11.10 trillion USD. This marks a significant 12.1% increase from the previous year, underscoring the sector's robust growth.

The first half of 2024 saw 4.78 million foreign tourists visiting India, with Bangladesh and the United States leading the influx. This resurgence in international arrivals highlights India's appeal on the global stage. Domestically, 15 million Indians traveled abroad during the same period, reflecting a 13.7% increase compared to the previous year. This dual growth in inbound and outbound tourism showcases the sector's dynamic nature.

Amidst this expansion, a niche segment known as dark tourism is emerging, attracting travelers to sites associated with historical tragedies and mysteries. Globally, the dark tourism market is projected to reach \$38.64 billion by 2030, growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.9% from 2024 to 2030. India with its profound historical narratives holds significant potential in this domain.

Recent studies indicate a high level of awareness and openness to dark tourism among Indian travelers, suggesting a readiness to explore and develop this sector. Destinations like the 'Remember Bhopal' Museum in Madhya Pradesh and the haunted Savoy Hotel in Mussoorie are gaining attention, offering unique experiences that blend history with introspection.

As India's tourism landscape continues to evolve, integrating dark tourism can diversify offerings and cater to travelers seeking deeper, more meaningful engagements with the past. This not only enriches the travel experience but also fosters a comprehensive understanding of India's multifaceted history.

3. Dark Tourism: Decoding the true Meaning behind the Shadows

Dark tourism is a term that sounds like it's straight out of a gothic novel—the act of visiting places linked to death, disaster, tragedy, or the eerie remnants of history. But don't let the name fool you; it's not about glorifying pain or indulging in morbidity. Instead, dark tourism is a journey into the shadows of the past, exploring the stories of resilience, failure, and humanity's complex relationship with mortality.

Think of it as history coming alive not in sanitized textbooks but in vivid encounters that drive you to confront hard facts.

From walking through the chilling hallways of Bhangarh Fort in Rajasthan to standing silently at Amritsar's Jallianwala Bagh, these destinations serve as emotional classrooms. They pose difficult topics such as, how do we remember suffering? What lessons can we apply moving forward?

4. Unveiling India's Dark Tourism Destinations: A Journey through Tragedy and Resilience

India, with its rich history and diverse culture, holds countless stories that have shaped its present. But not all of these stories are of triumph; some are marked by tragedy, loss, and eerie silence. These dark tourism destinations invite travelers to step beyond the polished surface of the country and delve into places where history's scars are still visible—places where echoes of the past linger in the air, calling us to remember, reflect, and feel. Here's a closer look at some of India's most hauntingly profound dark tourism sites, each with its own emotional weight, stirring not only curiosity but deep introspection.

4.1. Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar: The Unforgivable Massacre

In the heart of Amritsar lies Jallianwala Bagh—a place forever etched in India's collective memory. On April 13, 1919, British General Dyer ordered a massacre of unarmed Indian civilians, killing hundreds during a peaceful protest. The walls of the garden still carry the bullet marks, and the ground beneath seems to whisper the pain of those who perished.

Standing in Jallianwala Bagh, the weight of history is palpable. The air feels heavy, charged with the energy of lives lost and dreams shattered. It's not just a garden; it's a silent witness to the cruelty of colonial rule. Here, visitors aren't just tourists—they are bearers of memory, connected with the pain and the resistance of those who fought for freedom. To walk through this space is to carry their stories in your heart, reminding yourself of the cost of liberty and the resilience of those who stood for it.

4.2. Kuldhara Village, Rajasthan: The Curse of Forgotten Souls

Kuldhara, a ghost village in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, holds an air of mystery that seems almost unreal. Legend has it that the village was abandoned overnight by its inhabitants, who were fleeing from a ruthless ruler's greed and oppression. The desolate stone houses and the cracked earth beneath tell a story of escape, of lives upended and communities torn apart.

As you walk through the empty streets, the silence is overwhelming. The wind carries with it the echoes of an ancient curse. It's easy to feel as though the spirits of those who fled still linger here, watching the visitor who dares to uncover their truth. There's a deep sense of loss, not just of a place but of the people who once called it home. Kuldhara is not just a destination; it's a haunting reminder of human resilience and the toll of tyranny.

4.3. Savoy Hotel, Mussoorie: A Place Where the Past Never Left

In the serene hill station of Mussoorie, the Savoy Hotel stands as a symbol of grandeur—yet it is also a place steeped in eerie legends. Known for its haunted reputation, the hotel's corridors are said to echo with the whispers of its tragic past. The most famous tale is that of Lady Garnet Orme, who died mysteriously within its walls in the early 20th century, sparking rumors of foul play.

The hotel, with its Victorian charm and faded elegance, feels like a forgotten world—a place where the living and the dead coexist in uneasy silence. Walking through the darkened halls, you can almost hear the footfalls of the past, sense the restless spirits of those who never truly left. For many, the Savoy is a reminder of life's fragility and the unresolved stories that linger in the places we leave behind.

4.4. Remember Bhopal Museum, Madhya Pradesh: The Silent Victims of Corporate Greed

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 remains one of the deadliest industrial disasters in history, leaving thousands dead and many more suffering from its aftermath. The 'Remember Bhopal' Museum, located near the site of the Union Carbide factory, is a sobering place where visitors can learn about the lives destroyed by negligence and corporate greed.

The museum is a testament to the pain and loss felt by the survivors, but it's also a beacon for justice and accountability.

The photos, relics, and personal stories on display invite visitors to witness the ongoing struggle of Bhopal's survivors. It's impossible to leave without feeling the deep sorrow of those whose lives were forever altered-and the urge to act, to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated.

4.5. Munroe Island, Kerala: A Sinking Legacy

Located at the confluence of the Periyar and Ashtamudi rivers in Kerala, Munroe Island is a place where nature and history collide in a haunting, sorrowful dance. Once a thriving hub, the island is slowly sinking due to rising sea levels and climate change. It's a stark reminder of how human activity and natural forces can alter the course of history.

Walking through the narrow pathways lined with coconut trees, you can feel the weight of the island's imminent disappearance. The eerie quietude adds to the sense of foreboding, as if the land itself is mourning its own demise. Munroe Island isn't just a place at risk; it's a poignant reminder of the environmental challenges we face-and the fragility of life on earth.

4.6. Dow Hill, Darjeeling: The Ghostly Whispers of the Hills

Nestled in the misty hills of Darjeeling, Dow Hill is infamous for its haunted reputation. The dense forests, the winding paths, and the eerie silence make it a favorite spot for ghost hunters and those seeking a brush with the supernatural. According to local legends, the area is haunted by the spirits of young boys who died at the nearby school, their restless souls still wandering the woods.

As you walk through the fog-covered paths, the atmosphere feels thick with mystery. The towering trees seem to stand guard over the stories of the past, while the whispers of the forest send a chill down your spine. Whether or not you believe in ghosts, the emotions stirred by this place are undeniable-fear, wonder, and an inexplicable connection to something larger than ourselves.

4.7. Bhangarh Fort, Rajasthan: A Forbidden Place of Lost Souls

Rajasthan is home to one of India's most famous haunted sites-Bhangarh Fort. Its reputation for being one of the most haunted places in India draws both thrill-seekers and the spiritually curious. Legends of a cursed love story and the fort's violent

Past are interwoven with the structure's crumbling walls.

Visiting Bhangarh is an experience that is both thrilling and unsettling. The fort stands against a backdrop of arid hills, its silhouette imposing yet fragile. The energy here feels different-heavy with stories of ancient rituals and unfulfilled desires. To visit Bhangarh is to walk through time, feeling the weight of centuries of loss, mystery, and the unresolved.

5. Why Is Dark Tourism Relevant Today?

In an age where every moment is polished and filtered through the lens of social media, where travel often feels like a curated experience designed to please an algorithm, dark tourism offers something refreshingly authentic. It invites us to step away from the glossy, vacation-perfect snapshots and engage with the raw, unvarnished parts of history. Here's why dark tourism, despite its somewhat grim label, is more relevant than ever:

5.1. Learning from the Past: History's Unforgiving Lessons

History is not just about dates and events; it's a complex, emotional narrative made up of victories, failures, triumphs, and tragedies. Dark tourism helps us confront the shadows of the past so that we don't repeat the same mistakes. When you stand at sites like the 'Remember Bhopal' Museum, the chilling reality of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy isn't just a piece of history; it's a lesson in corporate negligence, environmental disaster, and the human cost of greed.

These destinations are living reminders that history is more than a distant echo; it is a force that continues to shape the present. For visitors, it becomes a call to action, fostering a deeper understanding of accountability, justice, and social responsibility. It pushes us to ask: What can we learn from this? How can we ensure that future generations do not face the same fates?

5.2. Emotional Engagement Over Surface-Level Travel: Traveling Beyond Instagram Filters

In a world where tourism often feels like a list of Instagram-worthy locations-places to check off for the sake of validation-dark tourism offers a profound shift.

Rather than snapping selfies in front of an ancient temple or a sun-kissed beach, dark tourism challenges us to feel something deeper. It compels us to connect emotionally with places that resonate on a personal and societal level.

Take Kerala's Munroe Island, for instance. Its eerie beauty and historical significance stir an emotional response that goes beyond a simple photograph. Similarly, Dow Hill in Darjeeling, with its ghostly legends, invites curiosity but also reflection on the stories that dwell there. The focus is no longer on surface-level attraction; it's about engaging with the essence of these places, understanding the pain, and honoring the past.

5.3. Bridging Generational Gaps: Connecting with the Past on a Personal Level

One of the most powerful aspects of dark tourism is how it bridges generational gaps. For younger travelers, dark tourism provides a way to experience history not just through books or documentaries but through physical, immersive encounters with the past. These experiences offer a level of engagement that can't be captured in a classroom or through an online search.

Standing in places where history unfolded, whether it's the haunting silence of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre site, provides a tangible connection to the past. It's no longer just about facts; it's about understanding the emotional and human aspects of history that textbooks can't fully encapsulate. This kind of engagement sparks curiosity and fosters meaningful discussions, helping younger generations appreciate and learn from history in ways that go beyond the surface.

6. Navigating the Ethical and Practical Challenges

Although dark tourism presents significant chances for education, emotional bonding, and cultural contemplation, it is not without its difficulties. Visiting sites associated with tragedy, death, and suffering raises complicated ethical, sustainability, and societal implications. As this type of travel becomes more and more popular, it also faces challenges that call for careful consideration.

6.1. Ethical Dilemmas: Balancing Respect and Curiosity

One of the most significant issues surrounding dark tourism is its ethical ramifications. Visiting places associated with grief and loss, such as the grounds of Jallianwala Bagh or the relics of Bhopal, raises the question of whether we are honoring the victims or exploiting their stories for pleasure.

For example, the prevalence of social media has prompted some tourists to use these locations as photo backdrops, trivializing the gravity of the events that occurred there. A photo amid a mass grave or a haunted hotel may get likes, but it risks reducing true human sorrow to mere spectacle. To guarantee that these locations continue to be centers of learning and remembering rather than being exploited, it is imperative to strike a balance between curiosity and sensitivity.

6.2. Sensationalism vs Substance

Sensationalization is a common risk for dark tourism. Media and commercial operators frequently use the "spooky" or "haunted" aspects of destinations, overshadowing their historical, cultural, or emotional significance. They become nothing more than experiences for thrill-seekers as a result.

While the Bhangarh Fort is widely touted as one of India's most haunted destinations, the fort's genuine historical and cultural significance is frequently eclipsed by ghost stories. Maintaining a balance between captivating narratives and substantive storytelling is critical for retaining the authenticity of these destinations.

6.3. Economic Inequities: Who Benefits?

For local communities, dark tourism can have both positive and negative effects. The people most impacted by the tragedies these sites represent may not necessarily reap the financial rewards, even though it can strengthen the local economy. For example:

Survivors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy have frequently expressed concern that, while tourism and museums remember the event, they have received little tangible benefit in terms of rehabilitation or assistance.

This discrepancy begs the question of whether dark tourism is actually assisting the people whose experiences it depicts or if it is only making money off of their pain.

6.4. Emotional Toll on Visitors and Residents

Dark tourism is not something that should be done lightly. Experiencing the darkest periods of history can be emotionally taxing for tourists. Observing a location such as Jallianwala Bagh or the 'Remember Bhopal' Museum can evoke feelings of guilt, grief, or helplessness.

Living near areas associated with sorrow can be emotionally difficult for communities. It might be challenging for towns to recover or move forward when tourists are there all the time. Balancing the need for commemoration with the community's right to peace and closure is a difficult task that demands compassion and planning.

6.5. Preservation versus Commercialization

Many dark tourist places have the difficult task of maintaining their authenticity while welcoming visitors. The more commercialized a site gets, the higher the risk of losing its historical or emotional significance.

At places like Dow Hill or the Savoy Hotel, for example, the push for tourism frequently prioritizes entertainment value over preserving the historical core of the location.

Furthermore, resources are necessary to maintain these monuments, and without sustainable tourism practices, their preservation may be jeopardized.

6.6. Navigating Misrepresentation and Stigma

Dark tourism is frequently misinterpreted and labeled as morbid or voyeuristic. While the genuine purpose is to educate and reflect, it can be perceived as exploitative. This distortion may dissuade visitors who would otherwise engage with these sites constructively. Similarly, some sites may face resistance from communities who fear that their painful histories will be trivialized or commercialized.

7. Conclusion: Finding Light in the Shadows of Dark Tourism

Dark tourism is more than just a trip to locations marked by sorrow, grief, or mystery; it is an invitation to confront the past, comprehend the present, and build the future. In a society where travel is frequently used as an escape from reality, dark tourism forces us to confront it.

It serves as a reminder that history is not always attractive and that the most important stories in the world are not often found in glossy brochures or neatly managed Instagram feeds.

By visiting these sites, we can put ourselves in the shoes of those who experienced events that changed the course of history. We focus on their hardships, pain, and resilience. We learn not only what went wrong but also how mankind has endured and overcome. The poet Rumi reportedly stated, "The wound is the place where light enters you." Dark tourism allows us to transform personal and social wounds into sources of reflection and brightness.

At places like the 'Remember Bhopal' Museum, we are reminded of the cost of negligence and the importance of justice. The silence of abandoned homes in Kuldhara Village reflects the resistance of a community that refuses to surrender to tyranny. The bullet holes in Jallianwala Bagh's walls reflect the story of sacrifice and the unwavering spirit of independence. Each destination contains not only the weight of tragedy but also the strength of human courage and the promise of a brighter tomorrow.

However, dark tourism presents issues, and it is our responsibility as travelers, policymakers, and storytellers to treat it with compassion, respect, and mindfulness. It is not only about exploring the scary or macabre; it is about meaning, fostering empathy, and ensuring that the lessons of the past are not lost to time.

On a broader level, dark tourism is consistent with the global trend toward conscientious travel. It expresses the human need to go beyond superficial experiences and confront the raw and unedited realities of our shared existence. As travelers, we have the ability to transform these visits into acts of memory and respect, with each stride forward honoring the lives and legacies of those who came before us.

The writer George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Dark tourism ensures that we will not forget. It converts depressing environments into ones that promote learning, growth, and hope. It tells us that even at humanity's worst times, there remains a light—a lesson, a story, or a truth that can guide us toward a brighter future.

On your next adventure, consider going into the darkness. Visit these sites not to romanticize tragedy but to ponder on its lessons and continue their stories. After all, travel is about discovering yourself as well as the world. Bad tourism reveals the historical lines that bind us all, reminding us that no matter how bad the past, we have the power to change the future.

Finally, gloomy tourism is about finding strength in survival stories, compassion in the face of loss, and hope in the human spirit's tenacity. Let us remember the past, celebrate the present, and go forward with open hearts and informed minds.

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