

Chapter 7

Tourist Motivation and Reflection on Experiences at Cremation Sites of Varanasi

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Visiting sites associated with death or macabre is generally considered morally transgressive human behaviour. Nevertheless, such dark tourism sites have recently gained visitors' attention. Curiosity and attraction for death are not new; historically, visiting cremation sites are rooted in Roman Empire. Regardless of increasing attention, the motives and consumption of tourists visiting cremation sites are fragile in literature. This study primarily focuses on the tourists' fascination towards cremation grounds and their moral and emotional engagement during consternated consumption. As most individuals who visit macabre sites have a keen interest in death, the emotional engagements and experiences at the site are integral. The transformational, subjective, and phenomenological aspects of such tourism encounters are also acknowledged in recent literature. It is crucial to continue and broaden research on consumer motivation by focusing on how visitors' emotional connections are created and how they affect the consumers' engagement and experience at the dark site.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has traditionally been studied from a hedonic perspective, with the assumption that experiencing tourism products is a source of pleasure and recreation (Buda, 2014). It is not a recent phenomenon for humans to visit and experience sites connected to death. People have long been attracted to locations, events, or activities related to cemeteries, sufferings, or disasters. However, atrocity, death, and

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war places that cause misery, distress, and a sense of potential harm have typically been regarded as discouraging factors for visitors (Buda, 2014; Biran et al., 2014). In literature, there have been several efforts to describe or categorise tourism that involves death-related experiences, such as ‘black-spot’ (Rojek, 1993), ‘milking the macabre’ (Dann, 1994), ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton, 1996), ‘morbid tourism’, ‘fatal attractions’ (Blom, 2000), ‘atrocious tourism’ (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005) or ‘difficult heritage’ (Logan & Reeves, 2009). Recently, death-related activities gained enough attention from tourism academia to be collectively labelled ‘dark tourism’.

Historically, a section of society has always been fascinated by the events surrounding death. On a community scale, people participate in death as a form of recreation. For instance, gladiators who battled for their lives, whether against other gladiators or wild beasts, amused the people in ancient Rome. Many people witnessed public hangings or stake burnings as events throughout the middle ages (Moufakkir & Burns, 2012). Boorstin (1964) argues that the first guided tour conducted in England was a train ride to witness the public hanging of two criminals. According to MacCannell (1989), visits to the mortuary were a common part of nineteenth-century tours of Paris, possibly serving as a precursor to the ‘Bodyworlds’ displays that have drawn tens of thousands of tourists to cities like London and Tokyo since the late 1990s.

However, why people visit places associated with death and grief is still a hot topic in literature. Hence, it is vital to understand how tourists behave while visiting sites to answer many of these concerns. Many researchers have proposed varieties of motivations for tourists visiting places associated with death. Specifically, Dann (1998) explains eight factors of motivation – nostalgia, seeking novelty, fear of childhood fears, bloodlust, dicing with death and the celebration of crime. Further, Dann (1998) describes these motivations related to tourists’ experience at specific destinations and activities, which may not be generalised in a wholesome way. As a result, the motivations, experiences, and behaviours in all destinations and activities related to death and suffering may differ, as each carries its magnitude of darkness.

There have also been attempts by researchers to categorise various kinds or intensities of dark tourism in terms of locations, attractions and experiences. Miles (2002) posits that, based on the location of the place or destination, a differentiation between dark and darker tourism could be established. For instance, the sites associated with death, the site of disaster and suffering or an immortal pilgrimage excursion carry different emotions and experiences. Furthermore, Miles (2022) suggests that consumption patterns and emotions differ depending on the type of destination.

Philip Stone’s (2009) “Dark Tourism Spectrum” has been improved over time and presents a various examples to summarise what is an ever-expanding, but still defined field. It offers seven categories of dark supplies from the lightest to the darkest dark on a dynamic continuum: Dark Fun Factories (morbid gaze), Dark Exhibitions/Museums, Dark Dungeons (Places of execution), Dark Resting Places (Cemeteries or macabre), Dark Shrines (Site of evident), Dark Conflict Sites (Battlefield) and Dark Camps of Genocide (Catastrophe or suffering). The aforementioned framework is undoubtedly flexible, and not all contemporary death-related tourism attractions neatly fit inside it. Others are abjection-focused, while others merely connect to the place of death (Bauer, 2021). The above discussion points out the depth of the places associated with death. However, all destinations connected with death may not be possible to label under a shade of darkness. For example, the Taj Mahal is a mausoleum, but it is not labelled as a dark-shaded site; instead, it is popular among visitors because of its architectural wonder. Here, every site and activity connected with death evokes different connotations, emotions, and experiences among the visitors.

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