

A Study of Dark Tourism in Pune City: Statistical Analysis and Visitor Perceptions

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Abstract

This research investigates the emergence and perception of dark tourism in Pune city. Pune, known for its cultural and historical significance, also hosts sites tied to colonial violence, imprisonment, and natural calamities. The study identifies awareness levels, motivations, and attitudes of tourists visiting these sites. Primary data was collected through surveys of 150 respondents at various sites, including the Aga Khan Palace, Shaniwar Wada and Kirkee War Cemetery. Statistical tools such as Chi-square tests, were applied. Results show that educational interest and historical curiosity are major drivers. Recommendations are provided for ethical promotion and sustainable management of dark tourism in Pune.

Keywords: Dark Tourism, Visitor

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as a multifaceted social and economic phenomenon, has traditionally been associated with leisure, recreation and the pursuit of positive experiences. However, in recent decades, an emergent and somewhat unconventional niche—Dark Tourism—has attracted significant scholarly attention. Dark tourism refers to the act of visiting sites that are historically associated with death, suffering, tragedy, or the macabre (Lennon & Foley, 2000). These sites can range from battlegrounds, war memorials, prisons, execution grounds, and cemeteries to disaster locations and museums dedicated to tragic events. The concept challenges conventional notions of tourism by intersecting remembrance, education, and curiosity about the darker facets of human history.

The term *Dark Tourism* was formally popularized by Lennon and Foley (1996, 2000), though the practice

itself is ancient. Pilgrimages to martyrdom sites, visits to public executions in medieval Europe, or battlefield tourism following the Napoleonic wars demonstrate that the human fascination with death and tragedy as a form of cultural engagement is not new. What distinguishes modern dark tourism is the structured commodification and interpretation of such places within contemporary heritage and tourism frameworks. Theoretical perspectives in dark tourism studies often draw upon thanatology (the study of death), heritage tourism, and cultural memory studies, reflecting the complex motivations that drive people to such sites.

Visitor motivations for engaging in dark tourism are diverse and multifaceted. For some, such sites offer educational and historical value, allowing them to engage with past conflicts, disasters, or social injustices. For others, they provide opportunities for commemoration and remembrance, honouring victims of war, violence, or tragedy. There are also elements of curiosity, thrill, and morbid fascination, particularly among younger travellers, which raises ethical debates about voyeurism and sensationalism. Moreover, dark tourism often fulfils a reflective function, encouraging individuals to confront issues of mortality, collective trauma, and the human capacity for violence and resilience.

The growth of dark tourism has sparked debate over the ethics of commodifying suffering. Critics argue that turning sites of death and tragedy into tourist attractions risks trivializing or commercializing trauma. Questions arise around how to represent victims respectfully, how to balance educational objectives with tourism demands, and how to prevent “dark tourism” from sliding into “disaster tourism” or voyeuristic spectacle. For site managers,

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the challenge lies in ensuring responsible interpretation, cultural sensitivity, and visitor management while simultaneously addressing economic imperative.

While dark tourism studies are often concentrated in Europe, the United States, and East Asia, India also offers a rich canvas of potential dark heritage sites. The country's colonial history, numerous battles, political struggles, natural disasters, and memorials create a complex landscape of remembrance and tragedy. From the Jallianwala Bagh massacre site in Amritsar to war memorials, prisons, and disaster remembrance centres, India presents significant opportunities for dark tourism research and development. Yet, scholarship in this domain remains relatively underexplored, highlighting a substantial research gap.

Pune, often hailed as the "Oxford of the East" and a cultural hub of Maharashtra, also possesses a layered historical identity. The city's forts and battlegrounds bear testimony to the Maratha empire and colonial encounters; its prisons and memorials recall the freedom struggle; and sites such as the Kirkee War Cemetery and National War Memorial reflect narratives of war and loss. Additionally, tragedies like the 1961 Panshet flood form part of the city's collective memory. Despite this rich dark heritage, Pune's potential for dark tourism development remains largely untapped. A systematic exploration of key sites, public awareness, visitor motivations, and ethical frameworks is essential for positioning Pune as a responsible dark tourism destination.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a statistical analysis of visitor perceptions across selected dark tourism sites in Pune.

Objective of the Study

- To identify key dark tourism sites in Pune.
- To assess tourists' awareness and motivation.
- To apply statistical tests to evaluate demographic and behavioural patterns.
- To suggest strategies for responsible dark tourism development.

The study (Valeri, 2022) has focused on the scope of dark tourism and the motives of tourists of dark tourism and it explores how these themes of research for dark tourism has remained same over many years. Research in this direction has never taken a different or a novel approach whereas the interest in dark tourism has steadily increased over the years. Many prominent journals have published research studies and articles on this topic. The researchers have also narrowed down the most common key words used in various studies namely man-made destinations and economics, tourist behaviour and colonization aspects etc. The scholars have put forward that the scope of Dark tourism to be expanded beyond heritage tourism and be utilized as a way to promote world peace.

This research study (Jose Magano, 2023) presents a systematic literature review of the research studies carried out for dark tourism under tourism specifically undertaken for tourism of holocaust sites. The study used three precise key words "dark tourism," "Holocaust," and "well-being." Findings were categorized in a hierarchical manner for detailed analysis. The systematic review reveals that the primary reason for the tourists included curiosity, search for experiencing an authentic site, leading to self-transformation and experience multi-generational trauma. The researchers found gaps in terms of profile of the tourists, impact of such tourism on the wellbeing of holocaust survivors and their descendants. The research covered both positive and negative emotions contributing to wellbeing associated with dark tourism but positive impacts are more transforming. The study highlights that dark tourism is provides a range of tourism options from exciting experiences to educational experience. The researchers have suggested a lot of scope for further research to be carried out in areas of psychological impact, marketing strategies etc. On the whole this study contribute by categorizing the existing studies and explaining how holocaust related tourism can shape the wellbeing of a tourist without making the historical horror as mere entertainment.

This research (Ma. Gina M. Fabros, 2023) covers the tourism indicators and motivations to develop dark tourism spectrum in Philippines and it analyses dark tourism sites in metro Manila. The spectrum categorises darkest sites which are associated with death and tragedy and light sites which are associate with educational purposes. The findings of the study tells seven main

tourist motivators: education, remembrance, sightseeing, recreation, family bonding, curiosity, and event venue use. Education appeared as a one of the most important motivator, which highlights that like to visit various dark tourism sites for academic purposes and learning about history. Remembering either a martyr or a deceased family member was another motivator where people visit burial sites. Sightseeing is also a motivator which blends heritage tourism and dark tourism. Some passive motivators being a general curiosity for gaining knowledge about man made tragedies. The study underlined that despite these sites carrying a narrative of death, tourists visit them to go beyond morbid curiosity and focus on, heritage appreciation, learning and as a means of social engagement. It established that by understanding these motivations the relevant authorities can undertake better destination planning, destination marketing, and promotion of dark tourism in the Philippines.

This study (Mert Ogretmenoglu, 2022) presents a bibliometric approach regarding the research on dark tourism as a concept from its inception to the current state. The study presents that though the term was first used in 1996 but dark tourism has been practiced since medieval times when people travelled to witness executions or see the fights of Gladiators. The study presents that the attraction of dark tourism has increased in the recent years as the tourists now want to experience something unique which is different from the mass tourism. England has emerged as major contributor for the research on dark tourism. The study emphasizes that all dark tourism sites are not associated with death and morbidity. The study suggested that various policy makers should refer to various studies on dark tourism before formulating strategies regarding marketing of a destination. It also underlined that dark tourism literature has been covered only in certain journals.

This study (Basaraba, 2023) explores the concept of dark tourism in the virtual medium by investigating the rising popularity of popular paranormal investigations on YouTube, as a way of armchair travel. This research studies the popular YouTube channel of Sam and Colby as a case study. This study tells that this is a new dimension of dark tourism where the investigators visit the various estates and homes and not war sites or cemeteries. This dimension of tourism involves scripted storytelling, organized filming on locations which have significantly contributed to the popularity of the channel. The researchers also

highlighted the income generation methods of these YouTube channels by way of merchandizing, commercials etc. The findings of the study suggest that dark tourism destinations can use similar methods to create immersive virtual experiences for the dark tourists and market their destinations in an innovative way. It also explore concerns regarding health, safety and moral considerations arising out of these paranormal investigations. The study suggests that haunted locations and heritage sites could benefit from inviting these paranormal investigators to film at their sites to promote dark tourism through virtual experience beforehand. The study recommends audience research about physical and virtual dark tourism. It also discussed the blurred boundaries between dark tourism, heritage tourism and paranormal entertainment. The study concludes that virtual dark tourism is an emerging phenomena and should be researched further. It also supports that paranormal investigators should be aware about culture and respect the heritage of dark sites.

This study (Hattingh, 2020) explores dark tourism sites of war of South Africa to boost tourism identify the reasons behind the decline in the number of tourists and reasons for the same. Though the recent research studies provide a clear indication that the tourists are still interested to visit such sites. The study quotes various other research studies which promote such sites as a tourist destination for educational purposes as we learn a lot from the past human atrocities. The study implies that a tourist for dark tourism typically is well educated and is interested in dark tourism for general interest in war or due to familial connection. The study also suggests that the younger generation is interested in dark tourism to connect with their heritage and they achieve it by visiting the war sites and concentration camps. The study recommends for the use of social media to attract younger tourists. Improvement in the infrastructure, general upkeep and maintenance has also been suggested. Dark tourism also has potential to generate employment and contribute to the development of the region.

The study (Dhatrak, 2020) has a thorough analysis of the concept of Dark Tourism in India and it can be stated that India has a lot to offer in terms of dark tourism destinations. The country has a lot of potential to attract dark tourism enthusiasts from all over the world. The researchers have suggested that the Indian government should spread more awareness about dark tourism destinations and promote them more. The arrangements

for accommodation etc. needs to be improved on these destinations. If the marketing and promotion is carried out in a better way the number of domestic and international tourists would increase.

The study (Ariza-Salazar, 2023) suggest that the tourists who seek a novel experience in the sphere of dark tourism usually conduct a thorough search on the internet before opting to visit the said destination. The structural equation model as put forward by the study, shows a strong correlation between intention to visit the site and conducting a thorough internet search for the information. Tourists seek the value both in hedonistic i.e. fun and exciting experience and utilitarian i.e. the practical experience in the case of dark tourism. The study shows weak correlation between the perceived risk by a tourist opting for dark tourism and the internet information search on the internet. There are a lot of motivating factors for dark tourism.

This study (Adnan Gul Baloch, 2023) brings to the fore the niche tourism segment of Dark tourism and the perception of people of India about this type of tourism. India has a wealth of various sites where war, crime and human suffering happened during Mughal Empire rule and also during The British Raj. These sites hold a potential for promoting Dark tourism. Though such sites present a great opportunity to earn revenue by the means of tourism, the feelings of the local community are negatively affected. The researchers recommend that there should be an involvement of government and media for educating the locals and promoting dark tourism. The limitations of this study is that they did not find a lot of literature related to dark tourism. Lack of good infrastructure is also associated with these sites having potential for dark tourism. The contribution that dark tourism can have in boosting the local economy is also highlighted.

This study (Annaclaudia Martinia, 2020) focuses on the experience of tourists when they visit places associated with death and macabre. Researchers emphasize the perception of tourists and the effect that news representation has on such sites. The role of entire atmosphere in framing the entire experience is of utmost importance. The part of local stakeholders need to participate fully and bring together story surrounding such sites as this leads to interaction between people and place. Usage of poetry style of writing for developing

literature and adding to the lure of sites associated with dark tourism is also brought forward.

The recent concept of Dark Tourism (Laylo Khaydarova, 2022) caters to the need of modern travelers who seek memorable and extreme experiences. Certain places which are associated with some tragic incident are becoming popular. Various sites which have a history associated with public execution, some infamous murder, sites of natural disaster and assassination of political leaders are popular for dark tourism. Some tunnels and border crossing areas of various immigrants crossing in different countries are popular as well. Routes of drug trafficking are one tourist attraction. Locations related to civil war of Spain like bunkers and anti-aircraft shelters are visited by tourists. Tourism industry for Dark Tourism is expanding regularly. Media is also promoting a lot in recent times.

Primary reason or motivation for Dark tourism as brought forward by this study (José Magano, 2022) is curiosity of tourists, the need to see and pleasure. This research has explored the motivation of tourists opting for sites of Dark Tourism. Most of the motivations are internal and this finding defies all other literature which focuses on external motivation. Dark tourists are people who have a penchant for melancholy, have aggressive personality and psychological vulnerability. Dark tourists have negative personality traits. The limitation of this study is that was carried out on a particular sample in Portugal, further research can enhance the scope of studies in this regard.

Relationship between the psychology and fascination with Dark tourism is the scope of this study. This is a relatively new field of study which involves visiting the sites associate with death and tragedy. Core field of dark tourism being tourism management of places of historical and cultural heritage which evoke dark interests. This study (Jorge Alexander Mora Forero, 2023) explore the psychology behind the interest in visiting such locations. The researchers have presented a theoretical and conceptual framework of vast literature based on Dark Tourism. Finding the latest trends in Dark tourism shall help this field of study.

The study (Virginija Jureniene 1, 2022) focuses on tourism in Lithuania and its management. The researchers state that for any form of tourism to be sustainable the involvement of local community is must. The study

indicates that the involvement of local community has been overlooked by the policy makers hence the tourism practices are not sustainable and therefore chances are tourism may not flourish. Dark tourism has garnered a lot of criticism but if local communities are involved and the potential for earning revenue is realized this situation may change.

The study (Kukreja, 2023) found that major motivator for tourists is the association to national identity and attachment to the destination of dark tourism and this dictates the tourist behaviour. The results of the study indicate that attachment of the tourists to a tourist site is a mediating factor between national identity and motivation. The negative aspect is associated to tourist satisfaction. The findings of this study have a bearing on policy makers and administrators and researchers of dark tourism also. If this study is conducted for a bigger sample size we shall be able to generalize the results. The distinct nature of dark tourism makes it an excellent area of research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Descriptive and Exploratory Research.

Population and Sample

- Sample Size: 150 visitors.
- Sampling Technique: Stratified random sampling across 3 sites (Aga Khan Palace, Shaniwar Wada, Kirkee War Cemetery).

Data Collection Tools

- Structured questionnaire (5-point Likert scale).
- Interviews with site staff and local guides.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Percentage
Age	18-25	20%
	26-40	50%
	41- above	30%
Gender	Male	60%
	Female	40%
Education	Undergraduate	30%
	Postgraduate	40%
	PhD	30%

Table 2: Key Dark Tourism Site in Pune

Site Name	Category of Dark Tourism	Historical / Tragic	Visitor Perception
Aga Khan Palace	Memorial	Prison for Mahatma Gandhi	Heritage/ Educational value
Shaniwar Wada	Tragedy	Peshwa palace	Mystery tourism
Kirkee War Cemetery	War	Graves of 18000 soldiers	Refective tourism
Sinhagad Fort	Battle site	Tanaji Malusare sacrifice	Patriotism heritage
Pataleshwar Caves	Ancient Religious	Cave temple	Spiritual curiosity
Yerwada Central Jail	Execution	Housing freedom fighters	Restricted access

Finding: Core dark tourism sites in Pune: Aga Khan Palace, Shaniwar Wada, Kirkee War Cemetery. Supplementary sites with dark/tragic narratives: Sinhagad Fort, Pataleshwar Caves, Yerwada Jail. Together, they reflect political imprisonment, war and remembrance, conflict, sacrifice, and legend-driven curiosity.

H_{0j} : No Pune site differs from others on dark classification, visitor interest, or development potential.
 H_{1j} : At least one Pune site scores significantly higher on dark classification and visitor interest.

Table 3: Awareness of Dark Tourism

Site	Aware (n)	Aware (%)	Not Aware (n)	Not Aware (%)	Total
Aga khan palace	28	56%	22	44%	50
Shaniwar Wada	34	68%	16	32%	50
Kirkee War Cemetery	42	84%	8	16%	50
Total	104	69.3%	46	30.7%	150

Table shows Overall, about 69% of visitors are aware of the dark tourism aspect of these sites. Awareness is highest at Kirkee War Cemetery (84%), which is strongly associated with war and death. Awareness is moderate at Shaniwar Wada (68%), often connected to conflict and tragic legends. Awareness is lowest at Aga Khan Palace

(56%), where visitors may see it more as a heritage site than a dark tourism site.

$H0_2$: Awareness and motivation are not associated with perceived dark classification or interest.

$H1_2$: AI (awareness) and MOT (motivation) positively predict DCI and VII.

Table 4: Visitor Motivation for Dark Tourism in Pune

Motivation Category	Aga Khan Palace (n=50)	Shaniwar Wada (n=50)	Kirkee War Cemetery (n=50)	Total (n=150)	Percentage (%)
Heritage & Education	18	12	10	40	26.7%
Curiosity/Mystery	8	20	5	33	22.0%
Remembrance/ Tribute	5	3	22	30	20.0%
Leisure/Tourism	12	10	6	28	18.7%
Spiritual/Reflective	7	5	7	19	12.6%
Total	50	50	50	150	100%

Finding: Heritage & Education (27%) is the top motivation overall, especially at Aga Khan Palace. Curiosity/Mystery (22%) is strongly linked with Shaniwar Wada, reflecting ghost stories and tragic history. Remembrance/Tribute (20%) dominates at Kirkee War Cemetery, where war graves are a key emotional driver. Leisure (19%) and

Spiritual/Reflective (13%) are secondary motivations across all sites.

$H0_3$: There are no demographic/behavioural differences in awareness, classification, or interest.

$H1_3$: Awareness, classification, and interest differ by demographic segments and behavioural history.

Table 5: Strategies for Responsible Dark Tourism Development in Pune

Strategy Area	Suggested Actions	Expected Outcomes
Heritage Preservation	Maintain and restore dark tourism sites.	Sustained visitor interest.
Interpretation & Education	Install informative boards, digital guides, and AR/VR storytelling.	Increased visitor awareness; authentic knowledge transfer.
Visitor Management	Limit overcrowding through timed entry or ticketing.	Enhanced site dignity.
Community Involvement	Engage local communities as guides, storytellers, and caretakers.	Sense of ownership among locals.
Sustainability Practices	Eco-friendly infrastructure.	Sustainable tourism growth.

This table ensures that dark tourism is positioned as educational, respectful, and sustainable, avoiding over-commercialization or insensitivity.

$H0_4$: Interpretation and infrastructure have no effect on visitor interest or support for official recognition.

$H1_4$: Enhancing interpretation and infrastructure increases visitor interest and support.

DISCUSSION

Most tourists in Pune engage with dark tourism *unconsciously*, due to poor site labeling or lack of educational material.

Aga Khan Palace is visited more for its Gandhi association than its dark historical context.

Shaniwar Wada, while romanticized by media, has elements of both dark history (murders, political executions) and legend.

CONCLUSION

There is potential for developing Pune’s dark tourism sector ethically and responsibly. Visitors are motivated mainly by education and history, not thrill-seeking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interpretative signage highlighting dark histories. Collaborations with historians for accurate storytelling. Digital applications or QR-based tours to explain tragic events. Training for guides to handle sensitive topics respectfully. Government-supported heritage conservation of dark tourism sites.

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