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Topic of Research: Hedonic Experiences at Dark Tourism Sites

Findings

This study demonstrates that dark tourism experiences at Jallianwala Bagh, Cellular Jail, and the Partition Museum are culturally embedded, emotionally complex, and transformative in nature. The findings challenge dominant Western interpretations of dark tourism as primarily driven by morbid curiosity, voyeurism, or fascination with death. Instead, in the Indian context, visitation is shaped by civic responsibility, collective memory, and moral engagement.

Tourists are primarily motivated by learning, historical awareness, emotional attachment, and a sense of national duty. Education extends beyond factual knowledge to moral reflection and identity reinforcement. Motivations are socially transmitted through family narratives, school curricula, media, and commemorative discourse, making visitation an intergenerational act of remembrance. Notably, thrill-seeking or death-related curiosity is largely absent. Dark heritage visitation is framed as an ethical and civic obligation rather than leisure consumption.

Visitor experiences are characterised by emotional ambivalence, where negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger coexist with and are often transformed into positive emotions such as pride, trust, admiration, and inspiration. Trust in authenticity emerges as a dominant emotional driver. Negative emotions are not endpoints; they are reinterpreted through moral meaning-making, resulting in emotional elevation and collective affirmation. Dark tourism thus functions as a space of emotional negotiation and moral reconstruction rather than horror or morbidity.

Engagement with dark heritage is multisensory, cognitive, behavioural, and relational. Authentic physical remnants such as bullet marks, prison cells, artefacts, immersive interpretations serve as embodied triggers that collapse temporal distance and foster affective proximity to historical suffering. Cognitive engagement moves beyond historical awareness toward ethical reflection on justice, freedom, and civic responsibility. Behaviourally, visitors demonstrate respect, ritualised silence, intentions to revisit, and advocacy for appropriate conduct. Relationally, experiences reinforce unity, patriotism, and collective national identity. These sites operate as moral spaces where history is embodied and socially enacted.

Encounters with authentic materiality often create reflective disruption, prompting reassessment of values and perspectives. Transformational outcomes manifest psychologically (shifted attitudes toward colonial history), socially (enhanced empathy and unity), civically (heightened sense of responsibility), and spiritually (sense of sanctity and humility). These changes align with eudaimonic well-being, as visitors derive meaning and fulfilment through engagement with historical suffering.

Despite their tragic context, dark tourism sites also generate hedonic value. Through hedonic reversal, negative emotions experienced within commemorative and culturally meaningful settings are reinterpreted as rewarding. Sadness becomes admiration, fear becomes inspiration, and anger becomes moral affirmation. Emotional coactivation allows pleasure and pain to coexist, producing both immediate emotional intensity and deeper meaning. Thus, dark tourism in this context integrates hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions. Overall, the findings reconceptualise dark tourism in India as a culturally specific phenomenon rooted in moral reflection, collective identity, and transformative engagement rather than morbid fascination. These sites function as civic arenas of memory, ethical education, and meaningful wellbeing.