

Transcending Dark Tourism and Embracing Spirituality in the City of Light '*Varanasi*'

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Abstract

Travelling and moving to places which are inspired by a search for a better life and real authentic self has given a boost to lifestyle migration and spiritual tourism. The holy city of Varanasi is popular among the pilgrims and travellers for taking dips in the holy river the Ganges, endless ghats, famous temples, fascinating rituals and vibrant religious festivals. The experience of being in the city cannot be limited to words as from birth to death, every aspect of earthy existence and salvation is achieved in this 5000-year-old city. International travellers come to the city to spectate the beating heart of Hindu culture and the cremation of dead bodies. The city offers moksha i.e., liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Dark tourism is associated with visiting the sites which are associated with death-related rituals and cremation grounds. In this paper, we have tried to understand how the concepts of dark tourism and lifestyle migration gets interwoven. How a traveller embraces these customs. How these dark sites reflect that life is a struggle and one can achieve liberation through moksha in this holy city. People come and embrace their dark side in the dark sites of the spiritual landscape of Varanasi. A person truly awakens when the dying has begun. Spiritual awakening is an end to all pain which is witnessed by seeing the dead bodies in Varanasi.

Keywords: Lifestyle Migration, Dark Tourism, Spiritual Landscape, Real Authentic Self.

Introduction

The concept of Dark tourism has gained popularity within a few decades. Its coverage by popular media has not only attracted the attention of travellers but also academicians. It is associated with the traveller's experiences specifically at the sites which are associated with death, dying and suffering. Sites where incidents such as warfare or natural disasters, genocide has taken place is gaining greater attention of the travellers. Can the element of death attract a person to visit a certain place full of gloominess or dullness? Death brings life to halt, it is no doubt the most painful event which is experienced by family members, relatives or friends. It is the most difficult truth to accept. It brings a crisis situation and trauma. People who have lost someone are usually in a state of shock and conflicting feeling evokes inside them. The four stages of the traumatic crisis include shock, response, processing and reorientation. A person tries to seek support and professional help to deal with the loss and provide relief and comfort. To reminisce over a deceased is human nature. Travellers can be seen visiting places which are associated with the events of death, some time to reminisce or to observe and understand the ultimate truth of life and the rituals associated with death. It is said to cope a difficult situation in life one should not find the escape route, but one should trample the fear beneath the foot. Travellers interested in dark tourism visit such sites to overcome the fear of death.

1. Drawn toward Death

A person is certain to die one day or another. Whomsoever we care will meet his fate or has already met in form of death. It is an aspect of life which keeps our ego alive. A person believes that after death he will either go to places like heaven, hell, purgatory etc. Few believe that death is a transition to another life for example reincarnation. Regardless of whatever belief a person holds, ultimately, he is ceasing to exist. Travellers at the dark sites ultimately care about 'me' or 'I'. The ego of the person knows the truth that life isn't in the body, it is inside the mind. Life is outside the space and time and it does not end. The ego doesn't allow the person to peep into the mind and it keeps a person captivated and enraptured by the body. Death is the ultimate bodily attraction.

This the reason that people are attracted toward death. It is the piece de resistance if the ego's thought system, but it isn't real (Gold, 2020).

2. Envisaging the terms under the gamut of tourism

1. **Dark Tourism:** According to Preece & Price travelling to sites associated with acts of violence, death, disaster and scenes of death and crime is known as Dark Tourism (Preece & Price, 2013). According to Light, dark tourism is an umbrella term of any kind of tourism which is related to death, suffering, tragedy or crime (Light, 2017). According to Ashworth dark tourism is related to tourist experience which is composed of dark emotions related to death, horror and sadness (Ashworth, 2008).
2. **Thanatourism:** The behavioural dimension of dark tourism is known as 'thanatourism'. It focuses on the experiences and motives of travellers who are visiting sites representing death. It is travelling to a location which is motivated by desire or symbolic encounters with death (Seaton, 1999). According to Knudsen places related to commemoration which attract travellers globally (Knudsen, 2011). According to Johnston & Manderlartz, Thanatourism is a form of tourism which is associated with death and disaster (Johnston & Manderlartz, 2016).
3. **Lifestyle Migration:** Lifestyle Migration is changing the place of residence for a better lifestyle or a fulfilling way of life (Torkington, 2010). In this form of migration, migrants not only chose where they will live but also decide how they would like to live their lives (Hoey, 2005). Lifestyle migration is a search for a better life, where the pace of life is slow and the cost of living is also minimal and free from high pressures of daily life (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009).

4. Dark Tourism in India

Dark tourism involves travelling to places that are historically associated with tragedy and the element of death (Foley & Lenon, 1996). A place associated with dark tourism holds historical importance and the dark locations of these places rather than resembling its association with the element of death and suffering attract the travellers for its historical value. A person who is usually travelling has a motive in his mind to achieve, motives can be diverse such as interest in human psyche or desire to pay homage to the dead ones or being nostalgic and remembering the tragedies and its effects. This type of tourism is also known as "Black Tourism" or "Grief Tourism". People have started travelling to places which are outside their usual comfort zones, the environment is entirely different. In the past decade, tourism has shown rapid growth in India and all sorts of tourism such as spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, medical tourism, wildlife tourism. Dark tourism is also gaining prominence in the niche. Though not much known about dark tourism in India few places fit best in this category such as *Jallianwala Bagh Amritsar*, *Bhangarh Fort Rajasthan*, *Kuldhara Rajasthan*, *Dumas Beach of Gujarat*, *Skeleton Lake Uttarakhand*, *Cellular Jail of Andaman and Nicobar* etc.

The demands of travellers keep changing and the tourism sector also keeps a keen eye on the changing interest of the travellers. Tourism generates employment, helps in the infrastructure development, cultural awareness and preservation of resources etc. Travellers develop special interest which focuses on experiencing something different rather than normal pleasure-seeking from the gaze. The new catering interest provides an experience which is rewarding, adventurous, enthralling and learning experience. Incredible India has various aspects to showcase ranging from culture, art and music to wildlife, yoga and spirituality. In case of dark tourism in India travellers are interested to visit sites, which are associated with emotional resonance, memorial sites having tragic historical significance or places that are linked with conflict or social and political turmoil. The history of India has been dark due to previous violent acts and mishaps. Dr Philip Stone was the first person who initiated the concept of dark tourism into academia (Stone, 2006). Traces of dark tourism can be traced even in the Roman era when audiences enjoyed the bloodshed of the gladiators. People use to gather in the medieval period to places where public execution took place. The unique nature of this kind of tourism has not only gained popularity in India but around the world to mention famous dark tourism spots will be Hiroshima and Nagasaki Japan, Ground Zero New York, Saigon Vietnam, Chernobyl Ukraine etc (Priyanka, 2020). However, the psychology of the travellers and motives behind their visit to dark sites is often questioned and is really difficult for others to accept. Till now dark tourism has been confined in European apprehension of rituals and death.

5. Embracing the Ultimate Truth in Spiritual Landscape of Varanasi

Travellers in the spiritual city of Varanasi, gazing the burning of dead bodies at Manikarnika and Assi Ghat make an effort to understand the ultimate truth of life. It is believed in Varanasi that a human body is not a body. Words cannot define something which is beyond the symbols. Our nature is limitless mind and we are part of infinite oneness. Our bodies are like a dream figure which we do not realize that it is part of merely a sleeping hallucination. All the chaos and disturbance, conflict and drama which we believe to feel is real are part of our dream. A person is a dreamer of that dream. In Varanasi, a person is able to reconnect to the true nature. The real 'himself' where there is no conflict, no war, no drama, no death. Death is merely an ego tool for rooting a person further into that dream. Whereas Varanasi offers these travellers blissful peace. It gives travellers another way of

seeing death. A person experiences peace, joy and awakening when he takes the path towards spirituality and losing the grip of his ego. Peace is the greatest enemy of ego and spiritual landscape of Varanasi offers peace.

A Diaconal worker supports individuals and assists families, groups and communities to cope with the difficult life circumstances and deal with the complex issues of life. In Varanasi, it can be considered that spiritual gurus, sadhus on the ghats and spiritual landscape of holy city Varanasi performs the role of diaconal worker. That is why 'they' say that "once you land in Kashi, you don't want to return back". For centuries, millions have landed into the city to spend their final days. It is believed that dying in the oldest city of Varanasi between the rivers Varuna and Assi will redeem all the sins of a person by Lord Shiva on the cremation pyre (Narain, 2007).

Varanasi is one of the oldest living cities of the world known for its iconic ghats, serpentine lanes celebrating mysticism of Hinduism and steps leading to the holy river Ganges. It is old as Rome, Athens or Jerusalem (Kumar, 2020). The scene at Manikarnika Ghats gives chills to the spine. For people 'Kashi = Death' and 'Death = Kashi'. Coming to Varanasi and witnessing the burning of dead bodies is ominous feeling. It can bring out the fear in a person. Conclusively death is cringing. The site of cremation can make the earth stood still. The scene of burning bodies and ashes flying into air and flakes out of ashes falling on the hair of the observer is something which cannot be explained in words. All efforts to dust them away goes in vain similarly a person can also not run away from his destiny. This truth of life can be understood when a person is in Varanasi. Nobody knows what is going to happen afterlife, similarly, the dead bodies that are being burnt don't know that they are being burnt. It gives goosebumps to a person, witnessing the body which we loved all through our life being burnt. For people, all answers lie down in the name of Shiva. They believe that nothing is wrong or right. Shiva gives life and he has the right to take it, there is no logic involved. There is a strong force in the spiritual landscape of Varanasi which acts as a magnet that attracts the person to return once again to this holy abode.

A *Sadhoo (Saint)* on the bank of River Ganges in Varanasi rightly said

When you come into this world you cry but, the whole world rejoices, and when you leave this world your soul would rejoice but not the rest of them out there. You know why? It is because when you enter this world, you leave the place where you belong. And, when you leave this world you are directed to the ultimate destination, your own home, your soul from where it came, it unites with the Mahadev. And who wouldn't be happy to go back to their own home? This life is just a journey. The death is like booking a ticket to your flight back to home. And yes, your loved ones cry when you go away. That doesn't mean that they're going to stay here forever. They are going to join you someday soon. Until then, it is just the time you give them., to miss you. When your soul unites with the ultimate destiny, they should feel happy. And that is why people shouldn't feel bad when someone dies.

This research study has talked about Hindu death rituals performed at the holy city of Varanasi and it has been argued that the burning of dead bodies at the cremation site of Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat is placed under the broader context of dark tourism. The focus has been laid to understand how witnessing such live events of death is though has a dark shade but has a lighter picture which unravels the travellers' experience and motivations. Varanasi has been a complex site.

The term "Dark tourism" was coined by John Lennon and Malcom Foley in 1996 and was mentioned in their book "death-related" tourism cases in 2000 (Sharma, 2016). In Varanasi, the travellers feel the authentic dark experience and it also draws a feeling of adulation and voyeurism simultaneously. There is a convergence of death and pilgrimage at the same time. Varanasi has been known for spiritual and religious tourism for ages but it also holds prominence in the dark tourism literature as a visit to dark places is often categorised under modern pilgrimage (Sharma, 2016). To quote Stone "visits to dark tourism sites or attractions in more exotic destinations, such as the 'burning ghats' at Varanasi in India or the 'killing fields' of Cambodia may be motivated more by the potential status of having visited such locations rather than by any specific fascination with death" (Richard & Stone, 2009). But the mentioned quote has often been disqualified by researchers as there are various narratives of Varanasi being presented other than being a spiritual location. Dark tourism sites are socially constructed locations (Baker, 2003). In this paper, we have discussed how Varanasi presents the aspects of dark tourism and how lifestyle migrants associate themselves with the dark sites at Varanasi. Varanasi is known as "Great Cremation Ground" (Eck, 1983) and "The City of Death" (Parry, 1994). In the sacred landscape of Varanasi, death and life co-exist simultaneously and multiple feelings and emotions are bestrewed together.

The Hindu pilgrimage Varanasi with the cremation ground has fascinated travellers for a long period. It has generated multiple meanings which cannot be analysed under the broader framework of dark tourism completely. Encountering death in the holy city also generates religious and spiritual experience. Travellers not only visit to gaze the burning of dead bodies but also have a deep desire to meet *Aghoris*. Aghoris are a group of ascetic Shaiva Sadhus who are engaged in post-mortem rituals. It is believed that they have divine powers and are occult practitioners who live the life of a nomad and reside near the crematorium. Hindus living at Varanasi held the view that life is not permanent, they will die one day or the another, thus they give up the fear of death or the presence of burning corpses at the cremation sites. In social psychology also it has been proven by the psychologist by using terror management theory (Fernandez, Emanuele, & Indramani, 2010). Varanasi as a sacred space is important for the understanding of dark tourism. Sacred spaces comprise of rituals of commemorating the dead.

It is also associated with religion, life and death. The sacred landscape of Varanasi generates experiences that extraordinary. According to Belden Lane "a sacred place is an ordinary place, ritually made extraordinarily and it becomes recognized as sacred because of certain ritual acts that are performed there" (Lane, 1988).

6. Death in Varanasi makes Life Easy

Varanasi is a multicultural city, people continue to live together under one roof irrespective of their religion. Diverse religions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity can be seen sharing an identical process in terms of performing rituals related to death. Though each religion follows a different philosophy of living, they share similar cremation process. According to a study Hinduism is the fourth largest religion and its customs date back to some 3500 years (Pew Research Center, 2017). Religion is a powerful force in India. It is showcased through the cultural practices and heritage dominant in Varanasi. The way of living of a person in Varanasi is dominated and shaped by religion. Whereas, as per the Western notion of the sense of religion is conspicuously absent when compared to that of India. The Western way of dealing the death is different and in India, death is related to philosophical concepts such as *Karma*, *Dharma*, *Atman* and notions of rebirth (Inbadas, 2017). Indians believe that *Karma* leads to actions or deeds, *Mukti* leads to escape from the cycle of birth death and rebirth and *Atma* is the inner self of a person (Dasgupta, 1922).

Life and death of the person according to Indian tradition revolves around the cycle of *Karma* and reincarnation. It is believed that "actions performed in one-lifetime bear fruit in a subsequent one, is widespread, some version of it being common among Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jains and some other religious traditions" (Burley, 2014). According to Max Weber world is an unchangeable eternal cycle of rebirth (Weber, 2017). Travellers visiting the spiritual city of Varanasi and observing the dark sites of the cremation grounds believe that "each individual has lived through many lives and will go on doing so until his *Atma* (soul) finally unites and becomes one with and merges into God" (Sharma D. , 1990). Being at the ghats eventually alleviates the person's fear of facing their own death. Hindus believe that all the life fore including the cosmos lies in the eternal self (Sau, 2014). *Atma* (the soul) leaves one body and enters the another be it a person or into any other living entity. Death is not the end of life, one continues to live even after death (Sharma D. , 1990). Whereas as in the views of Westerns soul is considered immaterial which is liberated presence from the human body. Varanasi teaches the idea of *moksha* (spiritual liberation) which a person can attain through the knowledge of real inner self or the (Sau, 2014). According to Bhagwat Geeta (2.22), the ancient Hindu text "as a man casts off his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones, so does the embodied soul cast off his worn-out bodies and enters other new".

7. Celebration of Death in the City of Light

In the spiritual city of Varanasi, every day is considered to be festive and day for celebration. The people of Varanasi even celebrate death. Death is usually on a contrary is associated with grief and mourning. Celebrating the death of a person as a concept occurred when a person is above 90 years of age and achieves natural death (Gupta, 2011). The family of the departed believes that it is a happy occasion as the deceased has achieved a full life and will now be reincarnated into a better life. At such instances the atmosphere is festive and the last rites of the departed are performed with music to the funeral ground. The corpse of the dead is decorated with balloons and flowers and people even throw colours while carrying the dead body to the cremation. After 13 days of the mourning period sweets are distributed among the family members and relatives to honour the dead. These astonishing features of Hinduism create stupefaction among Western travellers. They are in a state of shock and their mind is not able to process this different kind of environment, where death is being celebrated or people seem to be hardly affected with the demise of their loved ones. In Western culture even talking about death is considered as a 'taboo' (Leming & Dickinson, 2002).

8. Understanding Lifestyle Migration and Dark Tourism as Concomitant in Varanasi

In the context of lifestyle migration to Varanasi, previous studies suggest that Westerns appreciate the authentic culture of India and they are romanticised by the exotic and mystic image of the holy city. The presence of Sadhus, Aghoris, monks carrying daily life rituals unaware about the happenings of the external world is of unique experience to the Westerns. The quest for a better life of Westerns come to an end in Varanasi where they are able to witness the real, pure and original culture (Korpella, 2010). Lifestyle migrants visit Varanasi to end their quest for life to the fullest. They want to discover the ways to live the life which is full of finite energy and is not devoured by the fear of death. Lifestyle migrants and travellers at the cremation grounds of Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats can understand what it means to the citizens of Varanasi city themselves living in the ever-presence of burning dead bodies. Lifestyle migrants in this study are the Westerns who have arrived at Varanasi in search of better life and understanding of real authentic self. They find the lifestyle of Varanasi and the spiritual landscape so appealing that even in the presence of dark places they find the ray of life and positivity. Thus, they decide to live in the holy city for the maximum duration or even for the lifetime. Western lifestyle migrant witness the way of life of people of Varanasi to be completely carefree, they can be seen reading a newspaper and having

breakfast at the cremation site. Westerns gaze these activities, they feel amazed about how a person can be so carefree and unaffected.

In the aesthetic city of Varanasi western lifestyle migrants amidst the darkest sites find a ray of hope and generate a spiritual fantasy in their minds. They are perturbed at the mystic and irrational sacred landscape. To promote dark tourism, spirituality and lifestyle migration in Varanasi, the travel industry also weaves such imaginaries which in a way is sacred. The authenticity of the city attracts travellers, and few remain clueless about whatever is happening and why it is happening. It is very difficult to draw a line between what is authentic and what is not.

Dark tourism has grown over by 65 per cent annually over the past years. It is part of the adventure tourism industry. International travellers from across the world come to visit the spectre of cremation site at Varanasi. In the words of a Western traveller at Varanasi “ If one is looking for something authentic, he should come to Varanasi and visit the cremation sites. It will blow the mind, especially the Aghori cult. They eat the flesh of dead humans. It gives rise to morbid fascinations. One may wish to pay respect and reverence to the departed can come to Varanasi or simply gaze the site with an act of curiosity, serendipity and inquisitiveness about mortality and death”. There is always a relationship between the travellers and the environment of the holy place. Even dark tourism can develop a sense of spirituality. Pilgrimage, religious tourism and spirituality for travellers inspire to achieve some pious goals. In its simplest way, a dark tourism inspired traveller will come to Varanasi for sightseeing but will surely end up in explicitly becoming religious or spiritual. Spirituality is not bound to any person or religion. Visiting spiritual landscape of Varanasi cannot be taken casually, in fact, it is a process which allows a person to experience, see and encounter some of the wonderful things which introduce him to the divine self. Mark Twain once said, “You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” It means that we often think we know everything that lies before us. We being humans are accustomed to seeing what we believe is true.

Conclusion

It can be said that Western lifestyle migrants find possibilities even in the shades of darkness. It just requires a multidimensional performative approach. It is on a person how he visualises the performance going at the dark places like cremation sites. It is on people to conceptualise, use and interpret the events. There are various notions of authenticity. It is important to understand the importance of rituals and performances. Death related rituals in Varanasi present it as Dark tourist paradise but yet it is a pilgrimage site. There is separate space for spirituality, death and rituals which are interwoven together. It can be concluded that a person travelling to Varanasi can benefit from both worlds, the narratives displayed in Varanasi shaped by spirituality and rituals of death address the anxieties of the travellers.

Dark tourism is the new wanderlust for the travellers and is promoting lifestyle migration in the spiritual landscape of Varanasi. People are no longer curious to see romantic destinations and scenic beauty. Dark tourism has paved its ways slowly into the tourism sector in which ‘India’ is still in the fatal stage. Like a phoenix reborn from the ashes, western lifestyle migrants equally feel that by even being into the sacred place and gazing the dark sites in the city help them overhaul their minds. A new real and authentic self can be achieved in the spiritual landscape of Varanasi. The city quenches their level of curiosity and sense of validation. It not only gives an adrenaline rush to the travellers but also helps them to shift from their routine vacationing to travelling for seeking fascination of death and tragedy. The whole idea of lifestyle migration is in search of a better life and true authentic self, which can be accessed by visiting the darkest places of the city.

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