Unleash the Potential of Mystery, Ghost & Paranormal Tourism through the lens of locals in Kuldhara, Rajasthan, India: A qualitative study

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 ABSTRACT

Mystery tourism is a novel topic related to travelling to events or destinations based on some stories, myths, and beliefs of the host community or tourists. This also includes the myths and curiosity of locals and travellers about some known and unknown incidents or places. This paper aims to find out the experiences and perceptions of locals regarding mystery tourism in Kuldhara, Rajasthan. Ghost tours, paranormal investigations, and haunted stories have attracted many tourists to Kuldhara. In-depth interviews with 25 residents of Kuldhara, Rajasthan, reveal that residents have positive beliefs and ideologies regarding ghosts and paranormal activities. The study took in a year (March 2022 to Feb 2023). The researchers identified judgemental sampling, which has also been used in previous studies. This study is qualitative, and researchers employed thematic analysis techniques manually. Five major themes emerged from mystery tourism in Kuldhara, i.e., Myth and tales, Perception of locals, Role of Government and Private bodies, Impact of mystery tourism and economic benefits. The study reveals that most locals face mysterious incidents and believe in ghosts and paranormal activities. This study generates curiosity among the readers and researchers to understand and explore the concepts of mystery tourism better. Implications for developing mystery tourism attractions and support for resident well-being are offered.

RESUMEN

El turismo de misterio es un tema novedoso relacionado con los viajes a acontecimientos o destinos basados en algunas historias, mitos y creencias de la comunidad anfitriona o de los turistas. También incluye los mitos y la curiosidad de los lugareños y los viajeros sobre algunos incidentes o lugares conocidos y desconocidos. El objetivo de este artículo es conocer las experiencias y percepciones de la población local sobre el turismo misterioso en Kuldhara, Rajastán. Los viajes fantasmales, las investigaciones paranormales y las historias encantadas han atraído a muchos turistas a Kuldhara. Las entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a 25 habitantes de Kuldhara, Rajastán, revelan que los residentes tienen creencias e ideologías positivas respecto a los fantasmas y las actividades paranormales. El estudio duró un año (de marzo de 2022 a febrero de 2023). Los investigadores identificaron el muestreo por juicio, que también se ha utilizado en estudios anteriores. Este estudio es cualitativo, y los investigadores emplearon manualmente técnicas de análisis temático. Del turismo del misterio en Kuldhara surgieron cinco temas principales, a saber: mitos y cuentos, percepción de los lugareños, papel del Gobierno y de los organismos privados, impacto del turismo del misterio y beneficios económicos. El estudio revela que la mayoría de los lugareños se enfrentan a incidentes misteriosos y creen en fantasmas y actividades paranormales. Este estudio genera curiosidad entre los lectores e investigadores para comprender y explorar mejor los conceptos del turismo de misterio. Se ofrecen implicaciones para el desarrollo de atracciones de turismo de misterio y el apoyo al bienestar de los residentes.

 KEYWORDS
Mystery tourism; ghost tours; paranormal; perceptions; Kuldhara ; Rajasthan; thematic analysis

PALABRAS CLAVE
Turismo misterioso; viajes fantasma; paranormal; percepciones; Kuldhara ; Rajastán; análisis temático.

1.INTRODUCTION

Destinations play a vital role in Mystery tourism. The myths, stories and beliefs of the locals and the tourists constitute the idea of Mystery Tourism (Strielkowski, 2013). As the name suggests, there is something novel, surprising and unknown about the place the tourists visit. The trend has been growing in the past with an intent to seek experience and thrill. People are intrigued by the idea of venturing into places not vastly explored and have some unsung stories (Jordan& Prayag, 2021). Kuldhara lies 17 km west of Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India and 801 km from Delhi, the capital city of India. Kuldhara village was founded in 1156 by Jaisel Bhati on top of the Trikuta hill in Jaisalmer. Jaisalmer is known as the "Golden City" of India and is located in the westernmost region of Rajasthan. It is one of the popular destinations for international tourists due to its forts and palaces, desert safari, sand dunes and rich heritage. It also attracts many foreign tourists due to the famous luxury train "Palace on Wheels. There are few stories about Kuldhara which are still mysterious, and one thrives on venturing there and hearing from the locals.

Four overarching research questions guide this study:

1. What are the beliefs and ideologies of the locals about the history or myths of Kuldhara?

2. What is the locals' perception of ghosts and paranormal activities?

3. How do Government and Private Organisations play a role in promoting Mystery tourism in the Kuldhara region?

4. How does Mystery Tourism affect the behaviour and cultural identity of the local people and empower them economically in Kuldhara village?

Nawijn and Biran (2019) noted that very little research has explored how residents are emotionally affected by mystery tourism in their societies. Very few studies highlight the importance of mystery tourism, especially in Kuldhara Rajasthan. The researcher has tried to show the relationship between mystery, dark, and ghost tourism and tried to study the behaviour of local people with a narrative approach. Researchers have found that residents have different stories about the concept of mystery tourism in Kuldhara. Their views and perceptions about ghosts and paranormal activities represented communities' history and lived experiences.

However, more about residents' experiences should be understood when visiting these tourist sites (Wu et al., 2014). There is no study conducted on mystery tourism in the Indian context, and researchers have attempted this study for the first time in Kuldhara, Rajasthan.

1.1) BACKGROUND OF MYSTERY TOURISM

Mystery tourism has its diversification and motivates people with varied interests like Dark tourism, Ghost tourism, and paranormal tourism. There was never an official term called Dark tourism until 1996. However, people have been going to different parts of the world to view and experience mysterious and dark sites (Stone, 2006). In its contemporary way, Mystery Tourism has existed for a very long time. This category is controversial because of its concept and the reasons to attract tourists.

Mystery tourism can include abandoned places for unknown or known reasons, massacre sites, ghost towns, paranormal sites, prisons, and forts. Mass deaths and disappearances have always attracted different stories and theories. Thousands of tourists pay to satisfy their curiosity and fascination through these tourism categories. Right from watching the gladiator games in Rome, pilgrim visits to burial sites, cemeteries, public executions, war sites, and ancient temples all have attracted tourists with special interests (Korstanje& Ivanov, 2012). Some dreadful incidents of Hiroshima, Auschwitz concentration camps (Jews suffering), the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in India, and Chernobyl, Ukraine, known as a radioactive ghost town (Ironside, 2018). People from all walks of life are captivated by the agony and sufferings of others, and this is the most striking part of dark tourism and the mystery behind their motives to enjoy the sadist aspect (Ashworth & Isaac,2015). According to Jani et al. (2009), tourists enjoy natural sightseeing and culture more. Ghost tourism destination attribute and service Tourist attractions have many attributes, such as environmental atmosphere attributes, that make visitors want to stay longer (Jani et al., 2009). Ironside (2018), in his study in the UK, interviews tourists and ghost hunting and recommends a unique way to explore mortality and spirituality issues. Ironside (2018) states that through ghost tours, tourists can unconventionally explore questions of spiritual significance, trying to find meaning in life. Pharino et al. (2018) declared

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that, in a few instances, dark and spiritual tourism have common characteristics with paranormal tourism.

Figure 1 shows the relationships between different concepts of ghost tourism. There is a different kind of interest, which is overlain on ghost tourism destinations. Many visitors keen to travel to religious and spiritual destinations may also be curious about dark and ghost tourism.

Furthermore, interest in ghosts and places where tragic deaths have happened is linked to dark tourism, which associates the sites with death, calamity, and macabre pain (Lennon & Foley, 1999; Sharpley & Stone, 2009).
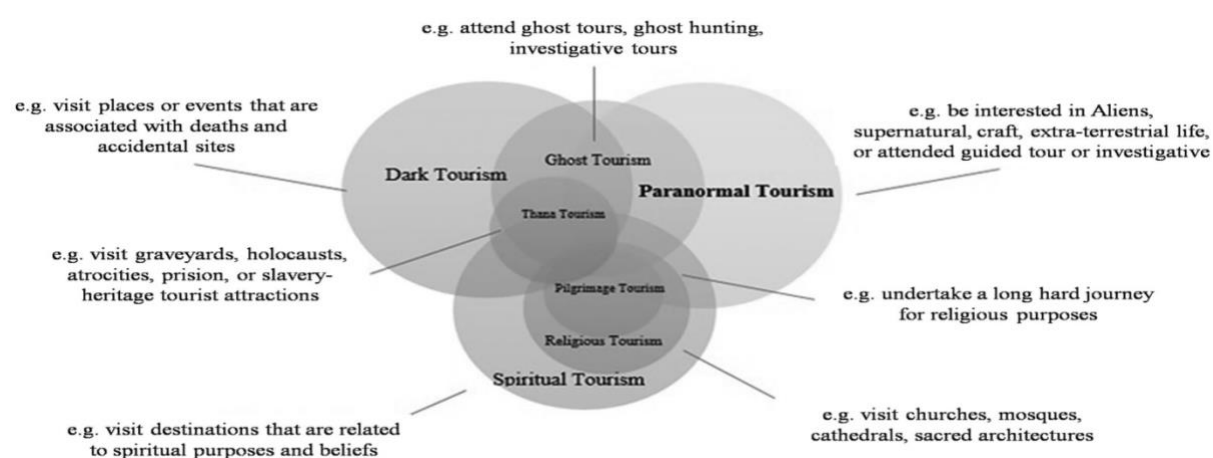

Figure 1. Ghost tourism in the context of different related tourism niches (Pharino et al., 2018)

There have been some mysterious destinations across the globe, as per the data found by indianholiday.com (2022). Raj (2023), in his blog, Mysterious Places on Earth, revealed some popular *mysterious* destinations of the world, such as Fire, which has always been coming out of the ground. However, the Fire of rain also comes from the sky at Danakil, Ethiopia, and is still a mystery. The San Luis Valley, Colorado, is known for some alien mystery. The Bermuda Triangle, Atlantic Ocean, is known for unfound, missing planes and humans (Raj, 2023). He also discovered that many destinations in India are known for their paranormal and mysterious phenomenon, such as Bhangarh Fort. Island of Dolls, Mexico, has a mystery of hanging dolls and stories behind them. Suicide Forest, Aokighara Japan Zone of silence, the mystery of people coming for suicide and haunted souls is quite mysterious. One of the many

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myths and legends has stated the appearance and disappearance of helpful and polite people out of nowhere (Goldstein et al.,2017).

There are many aspects, like atmosphere, environment, and heritage in ghost tourism attractions, which are interrelated.). Chahal and Devi (2015), in their study, proposed destination attributes such as social, environmental, economic and heritage. It is noted that elements of ghost tourism destinations have two categories: authentic historical surroundings and ghostly locations. Krisjanous and Carruthers (2018) pointed out that authenticity plays a vital role in ghost tourism.

2.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1) RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GHOST AND PARANORMAL TOURISM

Ghost Tourism is a part of paranormal Tourism as the existence and appearance of ghosts and beliefs is a paranormal brief and phenomenon (Pharino et al., 2018).Paranormal tourism challenges today's ontologies and representational epistemologies. On the contrary, ghost tourism is an extension of divorced forms of tourism like religious, spiritual, and dark tourism (Pharino et al., 2018). According to Pharino et al. (2018), paranormal tourism can be a mixture of both spiritual and dark tourism. The primary focus is scientifically explaining paranormal activity (Pharino et al., 2018). Several studies have examined different elements of ghost tourism as dark tourism (Bristow, 2020; Dancausa et al., 2019; Gentry, 2007; Heidelberg, 2015; Holloway, 2010; Ironside, 2018). Smith (1994) depicts that belief involves an opinion of the truth of a declaration despite all evidence to the opposing and belief mainly *based on* faith*.* Kluegel and Smith (1986) recognize that the "belief in a just world" is a crucial aspect determining people's directions toward societal disparities, resulting in belief in ghosts and paranormal tourism.

Mavragani and Mandrinou (2022) discovered the concept of dark tourism and emphasized the emotions and inner motives related to travel to dark tourism monuments. They also focused on the theoretical approach of dark tourism, its concept, meaning, and different types. Aranda et al. (2015) discussed the role of myths and legends in tourism destinations, and can play a huge role in marketing the destinations. Further, they explored that myths and legends can be practical tools

in tourism communication as a product. Wang (2015) analyzed the concept of interpretation needs and perceptions of visitors in eco-tourism and dark tourism sites of Taiwan, and the results revealed that most of the tourists were highly satisfied by visiting these destinations. Mendes et al. (2020) conducted qualitative research on voluntourism in rural areas of Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil and found an exchange of information among rural manufacturers and tourists.

2.2) PARANORMAL TOURISM AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON AND LEISURE ACTIVITY

Researchers reveal that many paranormal incidents have increased in recent years, and their beliefs also depend on the situation. For instance, from 1990 to 2009, the Pew Research Center detected favourable fluctuations in certain paranormal beliefs. From the same study, many Americans experienced other paranormal incidences such as re-creation, astrology, and divine energy.

Stone (2006) projected a typology of "dark tourism" products based on a "dark-light scale" distinct by their validity versus business activities. Alternatively, some authors like Light (2017) take a broader method to argue that paranormal tourism is simply one subset of heritage tourism. Smith (2015) analyzed that there is some terror feeling associated with every haunted site or mystical tour, and it also promotes some cultural activities with ancient drama. Nwala (1985) describes the concept of cosmology and its relations with human satisfaction of some emotive and rational drive to bring vivid direction into the world as a whole. However, some individuals might bring cosmological ideas into discussions related to ghost tourism. For instance, people may ponder the existence of an afterlife or explore how different belief systems and cosmological concepts influence perceptions of ghosts and the supernatural.

2.3) PERCEPTION OF LOCALS ON PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE

Thompson (2010) discovered in his study that destinations like Gettysburg (USA) are famous for ghosts and paranormal tourism, which shows the traditional belief in ghosts. Several ghost tours exist in Salem, New Orleans, and Atlanta in America and Europe. Also, many ruins and old heritages are popular paranormal attractions for visitors worldwide (Thompson, 2010). Goffman (2002) identified the concept of

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sincerity and presentation in his narrative approach and argued that there is a belief in ghost activities and tours. Lee (2021) analyzed the behavioural intention of tourists in Ghost tourism in Taiwan using stimulus-response theory. Pharino et al. (2018) first anticipated that scarce feelings such as sixth senses like vision, sound, sight, and fear in ghost destinations lead to paranormal tourist activities. Ghost tourism also provides some attractions for tourists and fun activities. It influences more tourists who love to hear ghost stories (Houran et al., 2020). Lange and Houran (1997) also identified that the perception of paranormal experiences tends to stimulate other paranormal experiences in cases that never existed. They reviewed the conceptual framework of paranormal tourism through the consumers' experiences and the visitors' motivations (Drinkwater et al., 2022). In Thailand and Indonesia, the concept of paranormal tourism and tourist motivation was studied (Pharino, 2019). The Atlantic (2014) revealed that there is a belief in the existence of ghosts in Asia, and different rituals are performed which can please or anger these spirits or ghosts. The leading five components which assess different paranormal tourists' experiences, according to different authors, are affective (Fredrickson, 2001), cognitive (Rodriguez et al., 2013), sensory (Agapito et al., 2013), relationships (Pearce, 2012) and behaviour and activities (Pearce, 2011). Drinkwater et al. (2020) anticipated that ghost tourism magnetizes tourists for real haunted experiences and locations. Moscovici (1963) describe social representation as a shared intensification of a communal object by a group of people to perform and interact with some ghost tourism activities.

2.4)BEHAVIORAL & CULTURAL IDENTITY

Paranormal is one of the Special interests of tourism; there is a curiosity to know what the tourists do in such sites and how people react when they are on the way to such sites. Schmitt (2003, 2010) explained the relationship and levels of intimacy between travellers, which may result in different experiences. Taheri et al. (2014) explained cultural capital as a blend of cultural practices, educational capital and the origin. Cultural capital consists of tourists' ethnic and educational background, perception of the topic, and information before visiting a destination. Jelinčić (2009) define culture and heritage as expressing identity and backgrounds, which might serve as a medium to establish and identify identities and differences, simultaneously localizing and globalizing the tourists' experiences. In this globalized world, cultural

identity and tourism are interlinked, and *tourism* is defined as a platform for cultural, social and communicational exchange (Natasaurosevic, 2012).

In research conducted by the American Psychiatric Association (2000), people are left unsure of their beliefs and commitment to the future, not committed to action plans as survivors of identity disorders.

2.5)ROLE OF TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS AT TOURIST DESTINATIONS

Stakeholders are integral to management or business organization (Fyall et al.,2012). The cooperation of both the public and private sectors is engaged in policymaking and managerial decisions (Fyall & Garrod, 2018; Garriga, 2009). The development and growth of the tourism sector and future roadmap rely on the government and private sectors (Van Notten, Rotmans, Van Asselt, & Rothman, 2003). In addition, Fyall and Garrod (2018) claim that only some stakeholders can analyze their position in maintaining destinations. Consequently, the participation of stakeholders should be dynamic with some variation in policy phases (Bramwell & Yuksel, 1999), with destinations of marketing (Buhalis, 2000) and crisis management (Morakabati et al., 2017). According to Pharino (2020), tourism stakeholders and residents can get an advantage if they realize the needs of the tourists. Also, there are different necessities for managing paranormal attractions and natural sites.

3.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1)STUDY SITE SELECTION

Kuldhara has been selected because of the experiences and unusual stories of paranormal activities in this region. There are few stories about Kuldhara which are still mysterious, and one thrives on venturing there and hearing from the locals. Around 200 years ago, Kuldhara was a prosperous Paliwal Brahmins village. During that time, Salim Singh, Diwan of Jaisalmer, desired to marry the village head's daughter forcibly. He had threatened the villagers of the consequences if his wish had not been adhered to. Overnight, people of almost 85 villages left their ancestral villages and vanished. It is believed the villagers had put a curse that no one could settle in the village. To date, the village is barren and inhibited. It is believed that people who tried to stay overnight could not stay due to some paranormal phenomenon. Researchers selected these

areas as it is known for mysteries. The present site opted for research work to make the mysteries a motivation for tourists and a source of resource generation.

3.2)DATA COLLECTION

To conduct this study, 25 in-depth interviews of locals of Kuldhara. In this narrative study, a qualitative approach has been applied. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach as it helps understand respondents' values, beliefs and assumptions of respondents (Choy, 2014). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the study took place over the year (from March 2022 to Feb 2023). Researchers used open-ended questions for this study. The researchers identified a judgmental sample with a qualitative and non-probabilistic approach. In judgment sampling, researcher trusts their judgment when selecting members of the population to contribute to the study. This sampling method can help researchers gain insight into a particular issue by selecting a small number of individuals who can provide detailed information about the subject matter (Reddy & Ramasamy, 2016). Participants were requested to refer others keen on participating in the research. The interviews were also conducted at local shops, eating joints and respondents' houses. The interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes, and the participants were offered tea and snacks to engage in the survey. To know the sample size, the data saturation technique was applied (Guest et al., 2006), and the saturation point arrived when no new thought emerged. All the interviews were noted in the diary and transcribed as the language used was the local language to reiterate and approve the questions. The tourism experts have taken and validated the self-administered questionnaire in this study. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, which was conducted with the consent of the participants. This questionnaire consists of five sections, i.e., Beliefs and ideologies of Locals, Perceptions of Locals, Role of Government and Private Bodies, Cultural and behavioural Identity, and Economic Benefits. There are 20 questions from the above-stated variables. Hindi and English have been used while asking questions to understand locals better. The study has been done from an insider and outsider perspective as one of the authors is from the same state, and it was easy to connect with the locals, and the other author was an outsider.

From Table 1, the profile of participants in the study can be found. In total, 13 men and 12 women were interviewed and most of the respondents' age was above 45 years. Except for four participants currently residing in Kuldhara, the rest had lived in Kuldhara for more than ten years and were engaged in varied occupations. Demographically, 18 respondents were married, and the majority of them were highly educated, out of which 21 had a graduated or a higher degree.

3.3)INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The researcher explored the experiences and perceptions of the residents of Kuldhara as done in previous studies by Coats and Ferguson (2013); Martini and Buda (2020). The participants were qualified based on their answers about the existence of paranormal or mysterious incidents in Kuldhara. The participants were probed to narrate their experiences and stories (Light, 2017; Nawijn et al., 2016, 2018; Nawijn & Fricke,2015).

Respondents Number	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation	Duration of the stay (in years)
1	Male	62	Married	Post Graduation	Govt. Employee	50
2	Female	24	Single	Graduation	Student	10
3	Female	22	Single	Graduation	Student	12
4	Female	58	Married	High School	Housewife	30
5	Female	56	Married	Post-Graduation	Doctor	35
6	Male	29	Single	Graduation	Engineer	10
7	Male	34	Married	Graduation	Hotel Manger	4
8	Male	58	Married	Graduation	Doctor	20
9	Female	57	Married	Graduation	Nurse	5
10	Female	23	Single	Graduation	Teacher	7
11	Female	45	Married	Post-Graduation	Govt. Employee	5

12	Male	42	Single	Post-Graduation	Govt. Teacher	10
13	Female	41	Married	Post-Graduation	Professor	15
14	Male	33	Married	Post-Graduation	Govt Teacher	16
15	Female	45	Married	High School	Tourist Guide	18
16	Male	52	Married	High School	Local Shopkeeper	22
17	Male	72	Married	Graduation	Plumber	35
18	Female	43	Married	High School	House wife	24
19	Male	45	Married	Graduation	Self Employed	18
20	Female	26	Single	Graduation	Student	11
21	Male	27	Single	Graduation	Student	12
22	Male	58	Married	Post Graduation	Retired Employee	32
23	Male	46	Married	Graduation	Tourist Guide	25
24	Female	29	Married	Graduation	House wife	14
25	Male	50	Married	Post Graduation	Self Employed	28

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Source: Own Elaboration

3.4) DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis techniques were applied following the process mentioned by Patton (2002). Researchers employed thematic analysis techniques manually, and five major themes emerged from mystery tourism in Kuldhara, i.e., Myth and tales, the Perception of locals, the role of government and private bodies, the impact of mystery tourism and economic benefits (see Fig. 2). In addition, five sub-themes also emerged from five major themes after in-depth interview. Thematic Analysis is a qualitative method of organizing and describing the available data by identifying underlying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis has been chosen as a primary method of inquiry since the qualitative research findings give a rich, detailed picture of

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the studied phenomenon. This type of Analysis is especially recommended to tackle intricate and convoluted constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Decrop (2004), both researchers used researcher triangulation and open-coded each interview exclusively to enhance the reliability of the analysis. After that, they compared their starting interpretations and consented to the main thematic categories. Further researchers also revised the transcripts several times, and through the discussion, the number of themes was reduced and became more concise and well-defined. The researchers have independently analyzed the transcripts and sought agreement on the themes reported in the findings.
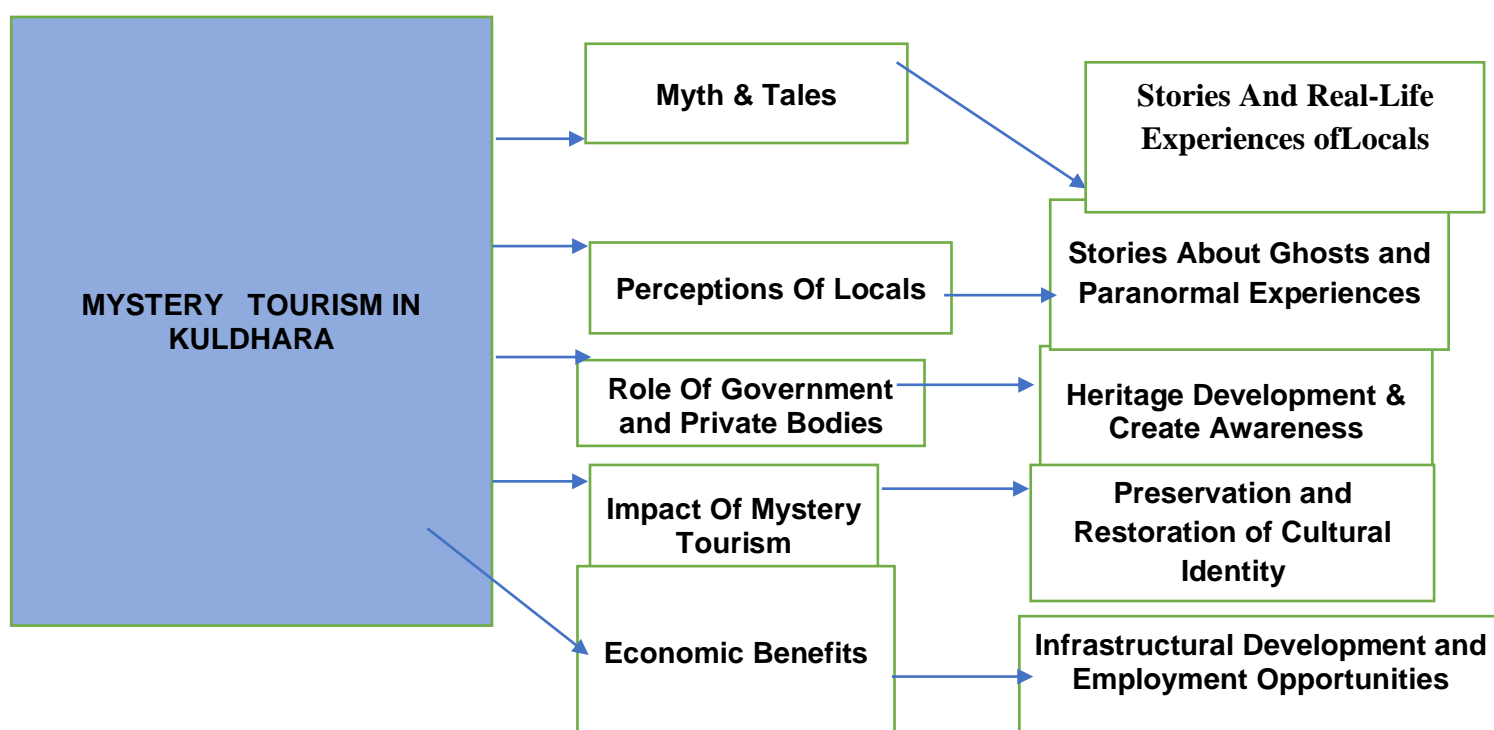

Figure 2. Main Thèmes : Mystery Tourism In Kuldhara

Thematic Model Source : Author's Own Survey

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the findings of the interviews and discussions with the local people of Kuldhara, there has been a very prominent agreement on the beliefs and existence of ghosts and paranormal activities in Kuldhara. The people were proactive and prompt in their interviews and did not hesitate to share their versions. The people were

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very progressive and positive in their thoughts about promoting Kuldhara as a strong Mystery Tourism destination in the future. Despite the solid cultural inclination and background of the place, people firmly believe that careful and sustainable restoration of the heritage of Kuldhara will lead to the economic prosperity of the destination.

4.1) MYTH & TALES: STORIES AND REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES OF LOCALS ABOUT KULDHARA

There have been interesting stories and incidents that the locals shared during the interviews, which left the researcher to ponder over the beliefs and mysterious tales of Kuldhara.

"*There is a district near my village with a Mughal famous for its ancient heritage. Akbar's slaves used to take baths; in the same pond, tiger and lion also came to drink water, and people say that tiger and lion are still seen drinking water*". (R1, male, 62 years old)

"*Under Pipal tree in the night, a witch is spotted, and then there is a bur flower where she hides*". (R2, female, 24 years old)

"*Old stories do exist, and there have been talks on the existence and fear element of the destination*". (R3, female, 22 years old)

"*Have heard stories from grandparents on the existence of ghosts and mystery of Kuldhara*". (R4, female, 58 years old)

"*The theory about the ghosts and their existence is in the mind of the people*".(R5, female, 56 years old)

"*In the folk stories, the existence of ghosts is immortal*". (R6, Male, 29 years old)

The majority of the respondents have talked about their beliefs about the existence of ghosts through the eyes of their ancestors and the stories shared by them. There is a similarity in their ways and thoughts while narrating.

4.2)PERCEPTIONS OF LOCALS ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF GHOSTS IN KULDHARA

Previous research has found that individuals with a high desire to seek sensation and are open to experience tend to have a greater belief in the paranormal (Smith et al., 2009).

The majority of the respondents agreed on the existence of ghosts in Kuldhara. They have opened up and shared their encounters with ghosts or paranormal existence.

The respondent agreed to the existence of ghosts and shared a personal incident.

"One night, while I was a child, I was walking on the road and saw a ghost sitting on the tree, which looked like a bear who made a strange and scary noise. I told him I had an axe, then the creature disappeared, and I moved ahead". (R 1, Male, 62 years old)

"My mother experienced some paranormal activities; it seemed like some goddess had possessed her, and my mother used to predict some future incidents". There are stories of children playing on these lands, cattle grazing, and now the land does not exist". (R1, Male,62 years old)

"Pipal tree has a well underneath, and a ghost is believed to be seen, and he is seen crying as a kid in the village. Seeing the kid crying alone, anyone would come and lift him in his or her lap, so unknowingly, people are experiencing a paranormal encounter". (R 9, Female, 57 years old)

"My grandmother gets possessed with ancestors' spirit .Furthermore; local people came and worshipped her, having faith that she was a goddess for that particular period. There is no habitation in such barren lands. People tried to build homes but could not continue to stay because of some paranormal/strange incidents". (R12, Male, 42 years old)

"It is experienced mostly between 3 am and 4 am. It cannot be described, but it is heard that it is not a very pleasant experience. As a remedy, the head of the village performed a prayer, but not everyone turned up". (R13, female, 41 years old)

"People not staying in the village is proof of barrenness and existence of mystery of Kuldhara". (R15, female, 45 years old)

Here also, the respondents' viewpoints share a similarity in their reasoning of land being barren and the existence or prevalence of ghosts, spirits and paranormal activities in the region.

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4.3)ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE BODIES

In Rajasthan, especially in Kuldhara, the roles of government and private bodies are very integral to the overall development of the destinations. Local bodies like Panchayati Raj play a vital role in the growth and heritage development of Kuldhara.

Tourism stakeholders play an essential role in destination planning and development, and both government and the private sector contribute a lot to heritage development and other infrastructures (Fyall & Garrod, 2018; Garriga, 2009).

4.3.1) HERITAGE DEVELOPMENT AND CREATE AWARENESS IN KULDHARA THROUGH MYSTERY TOURISM

The people of Kuldhara are very progressive in their approach and thought process to preserve the heritage of Kuldhara through Mystery Tourism.

"*Heritage development, ponds are being converted into step wells (Baoli), hotels and accommodation are being developed. There are talks on planning a tiger project*". (R1, Male, 62 years age)

"*The Government has done nothing significant, but it has a huge potential to become a tourist destination maybe through Agri tourism. There have been few developments in roads and hotels*". (R2, Female, 24 years old)

"*The government or private bodies can hope to promote Mystery tourism in Kuldhara by creating more awareness and information spreading the word through publicity, advertising and tourism can be the medium of doing the same*". (R 19, Male, 45 years old)

"*As compared to 10-15 years, the state and local authorities have provided basic facilities. This is an entertaining source for the locals through local and handicrafts shops*". (R6, Male, 29 years old)

4.4) IMPACT OF MYSTERY TOURISM ON THE CULTURAL RESOURCES OF KULDHARA

Identity has become a complex concept in contemporary globalized society. It consists of "customary practice and of beliefs, values, sanctions, rules, motives and satisfactions associated with it" (Jensen et al., 2011, p. 286).

Mystery tourism has relatively great potential in preserving the cultural resources of Kuldhara through local state or global intervention. By integrating Mystery tourism, the locals favour projecting Kuldhara as a culturally rich destination. Sissons (2005) concluded that traditional, indigenous cultures are every bit as modern as settler cultures but that they are "characterized by an affirmation and conscious re-appropriation of tradition in opposition to the modernity proclaimed by post-settler states" (p. 12).

"Religion and culture get promoted through tourism. Local costumes, ornaments, fairs and festivals define the identity of that destination. It develops harmony and cultural exchange among people through tourism. "Restoration and Maintenance is lacking in the ancient buildings and monuments". (R1, Male, 62 years old)

"Maintains cultural harmony and traditions. There is cultural integration through folk art festivals. There can be a better resource planning and execution through vocational training of the locals".(R22, Male, 58 years old)

"Cultural degradation is happening, vandalism is still prevalent, and heritage is not preserved, resulting in history's depleted ". (R23, Male, 46 years old)

"There is a need to create more awareness and provide information". (R 25, Male, 50 years old)

"Strong attempts should be made to remove gender discrimination and encourage social unity". The monuments and the heritage were not prevented from getting ruined". (R 17, Male,72 years old)

"Cultural identity existed for centuries, and promotion of Mystery Tourism would lead to improvement in the standard of living, and remove unemployment and gender discrimination, and lack of conservation has led to the deterioration of the heritage of Kuldhara". *(R 16, Male, 52 years old)*

Most respondents believe that the heritage and cultural preservation of Kuldhara should be addressed. *Cultural deterioration has also taken place. At the same time, creating awareness and preventive measures will lead to culturally sustainable tourism development.*

4.5) ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MYSTERY TOURISM

The destination's economy can be improved through fairs, festivals, sports, folk songs, and cultural dances". Rajasthan has a rich culture and heritage, and mystery tourism in Kuldhara supports many activities which attract tourists and generate revenue for the destination.

"*There can be better infrastructure and economic benefits through hotels, road connectivity, motels, restaurants, medical facilities and more job opportunities through taxi drivers, ticket counters, cultural activities, wildlife tourism, and web series and active involvement of social media". (R1, Male, 62 years old)*

"*The respondent agreed on providing employment opportunities through taxis, local shops, handicrafts, and kiosks". "This shall enhance overall economic growth of Kuldhara".(R 19, Male, 45 years old)*

"*Economic growth fosters employment, thus creating a better standard of living, continuous income generation and human development".(R 10, female, 23 years old)*

"*Increase in continuous income generation, standard of living, human development". (R 24, female, 29 years old)*

Respondent agreed that "Accommodation, amenities and resources are important for tourists to improve economic benefits in the region leading to more employment generation for the locals". (R 18, female, 43 years old)

In non-Western cultures, paranormal phenomena often significantly influence traditional beliefs, folklore, and spirituality. These cultures may interpret paranormal experiences in ways that differ from Western perspectives. For example, in many Asian cultures, concepts like karma and reincarnation are deeply rooted, and paranormal events are often seen as manifestations of spiritual forces or ancestral connections. Within these contexts, paranormal experiences are not necessarily

viewed as scams but as part of a broader cosmological framework. However, like in any culture, some individuals exploit such beliefs for profit, capitalizing on people's faith and vulnerability. These exploitative practices may involve false claims of psychic abilities, fraudulent rituals, or the sale of purported protective amulets. It is essential to approach paranormal claims critically and seek authentic sources within these cultural contexts to discern genuine spiritual practices from profit-driven scams.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, researchers pursued to investigate locals' experiences at mystery tourism sites in Kuldhara, Rajasthan. Significant findings from in-depth interviews with residents discovered that individuals experienced myths and tales of mystery tourism, and their perception of ghosts and the paranormal is significant. According to the findings of the interviews and discussions with the local people of Kuldhara, there has been a very prominent agreement on the beliefs and existence of ghosts and paranormal activities in Kuldhara. The majority of the respondents agreed on the existence of ghosts in Kuldhara, and they have opened up and shared their encounters with ghosts or paranormal existence. In addition, the role of government and private bodies is also crucial in supporting infrastructure and heritage development in Kuldhara (Sharma et al. (2021). Mystery tourism also has an impact on cultural identity, and it also provides economic benefits. Though, from a theoretical perspective, results imply that there is a belief and ideology about ghosts and paranormal activities where some mysterious incidents happened in the past. Most respondents believe culture, society, politics, or religious needs drive mystery tourism. Also, the significance of past incidents such as conflicts, battlefields, loss of national icons, and other essential locations linked with death has a significant effect on the history of the country, collective memory and identification.

Prior studies propose that diversified emotions are pervasive in such experiences (Buda, 2015; Knobloch et al., 2017). Houran and colleagues (2020) claimed that paranormal tourism is one of the niche sectors. They analyzed that tourists recognize the potential of getting attracted to paranormal places and activities, which served as a probability of developing Serbia as a paranormal tourism destination (Obradovic et al., 2021). Possibly predictably, locals most frequently assessed the

mysterious events in their lives as a part of the beliefs attached to the Kuldhara region and its myth stories. Therefore, due to this belief, Kuldhara has become one of the trendy destinations in India for tourists to experience ghost and paranormal tourism. These spots deliver a means for locals to share their memorable experiences and mystery stories related to their lives. After interacting with local people and learning about mysterious incidents, tourists were convinced about myth and ghost activities in Kuldhara. Paliwal Brahmins once occupied this ghost town, and there is a belief among tourists that State Minister Salim Singh was responsible for this abandoned village (Chandel, 2019). According to the Lonely Planet report, legend has it that they buried the gold and silver they could not carry in Kuldhara, attracting treasure hunters to the area. Some of the houses are in remarkable condition as they have been restored for use as film sets, giving employment to many locals. Also, there is an option of camel ride for the tourists that helps local people survive, and they get some revenue accordingly. In addition, tourist guides, taxi drivers and sculptures also get financial support due to the large number of tourists in Kuldhara.

The study's findings significantly contribute to promoting mystery tourism in Kuldhara, Rajasthan, India. This study may be significant for tourism policymakers, who can focus on infrastructure and heritage development. Due to mystery and ghost tourism in Kuldhara, there may be economic benefits for the local community. Local bodies like Panchayati Raj play a vital role in the growth and heritage development of Kuldhara. Mystery tourism in Kuldhara supports many activities which attract tourists and generate revenue for the destination. It is also vital for tourism stakeholders to promote mystery tourism through social media and websites, which can attract a large number of tourists from all over the globe. Subsequently, this research can be applied by tourism stakeholders and researchers to understand and explore the concept of mystery, ghost and paranormal tourism in future.

5.1) RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

As per the report of Times of India dated February 2017, in the name of renovating Kuldhara village, the old houses are being removed by earth pullers, and efforts were being made to give the place a new look. The 200-year-old architecture is in crisis. A private company is doing the work on a public-private partnership without

the supervision of the experts. Some houses have been removed, and tourists, historians, and locals have expressed their shock over the tampering with the basic houses. The state government and a private company had signed an MOU to restore Kuldhara village. According to the locals, looking at that change is distressing, and because of this, Kuldhara is losing its charm. According to a Times of India 2020 report, the Rajasthan High Court Bench gave orders to stop all commercial activities; however, the commercial activities can be carried out where there is no old structure. If these strategies and policies are implemented holistically, there will be overall social and economic development of Kuldhara, and it will benefit the locals. This will also help preserve and restore the heritage and cultural resources of Kuldhara sustainably.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Moreover, this research only focuses on one destination, i.e., Kuldhara, but other mysterious destinations remain to be studied in India and worldwide. The methodology used was qualitative and not quantitative, and it was exploratory. Future research on encounters and interactions with locals should use quantitative techniques and other forms of qualitative analysis (e.g., individual in-depth interviews and focus groups). Secondly, despite applying data saturation as a sampling method, there is a probability that the views articulated by locals in this study need to apprehend the complete array of sentiments experienced by locals at such spots(Islam et al. (2023). Additionally, the study can be focused on the limits of emotion evoked. These restraints unlock numerous possibilities for future research. For instance, additional methodical attempts must be used by researchers to recognize the meaning and surrounding reasons for mystery tourism sites for residents and host communities.. The sample size could have been more significant if the region was widely populated, so finding the respondents for the interview took much work. In addition to that, destination marketing should also promote similar mystery tourism destinations that can attract a large number of visitors (Holešinska, 2007).

Kindly Note: Authors used professional translators to correct the grammatical errors

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