

**Haunted Heritage and Archaeological Landscapes: Exploring Folklore, Dark Tourism,
and Community Narratives in Taxila, Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

The famous archaeological remnants of Pakistan's Taxila Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, show the cross-cultural interactions of ancient South Asian civilizations. In addition to its well-known stupas and Buddhist temples, Taxila is encircled by a thick layer of scary mythology that has been kept by the inhabitants of the area. An intangible cultural layer that is sometimes disregarded in legacy studies is revealed by tales of haunted monks, cursed artifacts, and abandoned cities. Using theoretical perspectives from dark tourism, intangible cultural heritage, postmodern tourist experiences, and community-based tourism, this chapter analyzes Taxila as a case study within the developing discourse on haunted heritage tourism. The results demonstrate how folklore gives archaeological landscapes emotional and sensory richness, opening possibilities for fully immersive tourist interaction. Its integration into tourism is complicated by issues including fragile monuments, religious sensitivities, a lack of conservation resources, and the spread of false ghost stories by illegal excavators. The chapter makes the case that haunting folklore should be acknowledged as an important cultural asset that enhances Taxila's fundamental value. Haunted heritage tourism has the potential to expand Pakistan's tourist industry while boosting cultural identity and historical preservation provided it is implemented effectively, with conservation measures in the area and local involvement.

Keywords: Taxila Valley; Haunted Heritage; Dark Tourism; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Folklore

INTRODUCTION

Taxila Valley, situated about 30 kilometers northwest of Islamabad in Pakistan's Punjab province, is one of South Asia's most significant archaeological landscapes. Declared by UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980, the valley contains more than fifty archaeological remains that reflect a continuous cultural history stretching over a thousand years. From the ancient city of Bhir Mound to the Buddhist monasteries of Jaulian and Mohra Murado, Taxila showcases the legacies of Persian, Greek, Mauryan, Scythian, Parthian, and Kushan influences. Scholars and tourists usually associate the valley with Buddhist learning and Gandharan art. Yet beyond this well-known image lies another, less explored dimension haunted folklore that has been passed down through generations.

For the communities living around Taxila, the ruins are not only stones of the past but landscapes full of stories. Elders often share accounts of cursed relics, monks wandering the monastery corridors at night, or strange lights flickering over deserted ruins. Local tales suggest that Bhir Mound hides treasures guarded by restless spirits, while Jaulian monastery is said to echo with mysterious chants long after dark. These narratives, circulated orally, shape how people interact with the ruins in everyday life. In this way, Taxila is not only an archaeological site but also a cultural space where memory, belief, and imagination are deeply connected.

Tourism research has increasingly acknowledged the value of such intangible traditions. Within the broader area of dark tourism which focuses on places linked with death, tragedy, or the supernatural the concept of haunted heritage has emerged as a field of study. Much of the existing research on dark tourism looks at battlefields, prisons, or memorials, but haunted heritage highlights folklore, oral stories, and paranormal beliefs. Cities such as Edinburgh, York, New Orleans, and Gettysburg have shown how ghost stories and history can be combined to create experiences that attract tourists seeking atmosphere, mystery, and a deeper sense of place.

Placing Taxila in this global context opens an important question: can its haunted folklore be developed into a sustainable form of heritage tourism? On one side, ghostly narrative could add diversity to Pakistan's tourism profile, which has mainly focused on landscapes, shrines, and Buddhist archaeology. Haunted heritage would introduce a new experiential element, appealing to younger travelers and international tourists who look for immersive experiences. On the other hand, challenges are clear. Taxila's sites are fragile, its Buddhist remains are sacred to communities worldwide, and careless use of ghost stories could damage both the dignity of the ruins and the credibility of heritage management.

For this reason, introducing haunted heritage tourism at Taxila cannot be a matter of simply arranging ghost walks or organizing storytelling events. It requires a sensitive approach that respects conservation, cultural values, and authenticity while still allowing for creative interpretation. Policymakers, heritage managers, and local communities will all need to play a role in deciding how such folklore should be documented and presented. The key challenge is to recognize these stories as part of living heritage without reducing them to pure entertainment.

This chapter places Taxila as a case study within the growing field of haunted heritage tourism. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework, drawing on debates from dark tourism, intangible cultural heritage, and postmodern tourism studies. It then turns to the haunted folklore of Taxila, considering how local communities perceive these stories and how they might be integrated into tourism development. Potential opportunities such as guided walks, storytelling events, and digital haunted tours are examined alongside the risks of conservation problems, authenticity concerns, and religious sensitivities. Policy issues, management strategies, and the role of community participation are also discussed.

Overall, the chapter argues that haunted folklore should not be dismissed as superstition. Instead, it can be seen as an intangible cultural resource that adds depth to Taxila's universal value. If developed carefully, these narratives could support a distinctive model of heritage tourism in South Asia, one that combines archaeology, community voices, and tourist imagination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dark Tourism in Context

The idea of dark tourism has been discussed in academic literature for more than two decades, though its definitions and boundaries remain debated. Lennon and Foley (2000) were among the first to formalize the term, linking it to consumer culture and the media's growing fascination with death and tragedy. Their work emphasized how places tied to suffering, disasters, or the macabre are increasingly packaged as tourism products. Since then, scholars such as Dale and Robinson (2011), Tarlow (2005), and Stone (2013) have widened the discussion, showing that dark tourism includes a broad spectrum of sites, from war memorials to disaster landscapes.

One of the most cited contributions is Stone's (2006) "spectrum of darkness," which organizes attractions from the "darkest" such as genocide memorials and concentration camps to the "lightest," such as ghost tours and theatrical haunted houses. Although this spectrum has been critiqued for being too subjective (Ashworth & Isaac, 2015; Ivanova & Light, 2018), it provides a useful way to capture the diversity of experiences that fall under dark tourism. For example, Bucior (2019) illustrates how ghost tours in Gettysburg offer a balance between solemn remembrance and playful storytelling, showing how heritage can be interpreted in multiple ways.

At its core, dark tourism reflects a universal human curiosity about death, mystery, and the supernatural. However, debates continue whether it should be treated as a distinct form of tourism or as a branch of heritage tourism. Light (2017) argues that two decades of research have not provided a clear conceptual distinction between dark tourism, Thana tourism, and heritage tourism. Tourist motivations at dark sites often overlap with those at heritage destinations, including curiosity, remembrance, or identity-building (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). This suggests that dark tourism is not entirely separate but rather one mode of experiencing heritage.

Dark Tourism and Heritage Tourism

The overlap between dark tourism and heritage tourism is particularly relevant here. Richards (2001) stressed that heritage should not be limited to monuments and material culture but must also include intangible elements such as memory, identity, and conflict. This perspective aligns with sites often associated with dark tourism, which carry contested or painful pasts. Hartmann (2014) also emphasized that heritage and dark tourism are inseparable, as conflict and death are fundamental aspects of history. To capture this intersection, the term "dark heritage" (Kamber et al., 2016) has gained recognition, describing sites where tangible remains are tied to tragic or difficult histories.

Tourist motivations for visiting dark heritage sites are diverse. Biran, Poria, and Oren (2011) found that many tourists are not driven by morbid fascination but by broader reasons such as education, novelty, or personal connections. For example, Australians and New Zealanders who visit Gallipoli often regard the journey as a commemorative heritage experience rather than as dark tourism. Stone and Sharpley (2008) similarly note that remembrance, pilgrimage, and identity often overlap with heritage tourism. Collins-Kreiner (2016) adds that these visits can function as modern pilgrimages, where tourists negotiate both personal and collective identities.

At the same time, the commercialization of dark heritage raises serious ethical issues. Dann (1994) warned against "milking the macabre" by turning human tragedy into profit. Stone and Sharpley (2008) also argue that authenticity is central to sustainable dark heritage management. While "lighter" forms of dark tourism,

such as ghost tours, may succeed without deep authenticity, solemn sites risk being trivialized if presented in overly sensational ways. Nonetheless, dark heritage sites play vital roles in collective memory and reconciliation (Kennell, Šuligoj, & Lesjak, 2018), suggesting their importance goes beyond tourism economics.

Tourism and World Heritage Sites

UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention established a framework to safeguard cultural and natural sites with "outstanding universal value" (Leask & Fyall, 2001). As of 2020, more than 1,100 properties were inscribed on the World Heritage List, including 869 cultural sites (UNESCO, 2020). Inscription often brings international recognition, increased tourist arrivals, and access to conservation resources (Dans & Gonzalez, 2019). However, the long-term benefits are mixed. While some sites experience revitalization and economic growth, others face over-tourism, limited infrastructure, or unevenly distributed gains (Gao & Su, 2019; Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020).

Authenticity remains a central challenge for WHS tourism. Yi et al. (2018) note that official understandings of authenticity based on archaeological or historical accuracy often differ from tourist perceptions, which may be shaped by imagination, atmosphere, or emotional connection. These tensions become more visible in urban contexts where different stakeholders' government agencies, local communities, and tourists interpret sites in conflicting ways (Imon, 2017). Governance is therefore crucial, as WHS management requires balancing state responsibility with community participation (Su & Wall, 2012; Ashton Adie & Amore, 2020). Without this balance, heritage risks becoming disconnected from the communities living closest to it.

Sustainable tourism frameworks emphasize that heritage management must integrate conservation with cultural, social, and economic benefits (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2017; Liburd & Becken, 2017). For WHS considering haunted or dark heritage, this balance is particularly delicate. On the one hand, ghost stories and folklore can enrich tourist experiences and attract new audiences. On the other hand, there are real risks of trivialization, sensationalism, and tension between sacredness and entertainment.

Haunted Heritage and South Asian Contexts

Internationally, haunted heritage has developed into a growing niche within dark tourism. Cities such as York in the United Kingdom are famous for ghost walks that combine medieval architecture with storytelling (Hanks, 2015). In Romania, the Dracula myth has been tied to castles and landscapes associated with Vlad the Impaler, drawing thousands of international tourists (Light, 2017). In the United States, New Orleans and Savannah promote ghost tours that merge architecture, folklore, and paranormal legends (Kolk, 2020). These examples show how haunted heritage can merge entertainment, folklore, and history to create immersive experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Any discussion on haunted heritage tourism at Taxila must be grounded in broader debates within tourism and heritage studies. Over the past three decades, scholars have increasingly examined how sites associated with death, fear, and the supernatural attract tourists, shaping both cultural consumption and destination development. Three overlapping concepts dark tourism, intangible cultural heritage, and postmodern tourist experiences form the theoretical backbone of this chapter.

Dark Tourism and Haunted Heritage

The concept of dark tourism was popularized by Lennon and Foley (2000), who described it as tourism to sites associated with death, disaster, or the macabre. Since then, scholars such as Stone (2006, 2012) have expanded the framework, introducing the “Dark Tourism Spectrum,” which ranges from sites of actual tragedy (genocide memorials, concentration camps) to lighter forms of consumption such as ghost walks or Halloween attractions. This spectrum is useful for placing haunted heritage within the wider discussion.

Haunted folklore associated with ancient ruins tends to fall on the “lighter” side of Stone’s spectrum, since tourists are attracted by imagination, atmosphere, and storytelling rather than by documented tragedy. Taxila’s ghost stories monks chanting in ruined monasteries or treasures cursed by spirits do not memorialize human suffering in the same way that, for example, Auschwitz or Hiroshima does. Instead, they invite tourists to engage with the supernatural as a layer of meaning attached to archaeological heritage. In this sense, haunted heritage can be seen as an intersection between dark tourism and cultural heritage interpretation.

Light (2017) also reminds us that dark tourism should not only be understood through Western tragedies but must be contextualized in diverse cultural settings. From my perspective as a researcher working in Pakistan, this is particularly relevant. Haunted folklore in Taxila is not imported entertainment, it emerges organically from local traditions and beliefs. This makes it an important example of how global theories of dark tourism can be localized within South Asian cultural contexts.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Folklore

The second theoretical lens is intangible cultural heritage (ICH), a concept formalized by UNESCO (2003) to highlight practices, traditions, and expressions that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity. While Taxila’s material heritage monasteries, stupas, sculptures has been extensively documented, its intangible folklore has received little attention. Yet these oral traditions, myths, and ghost stories form a living cultural layer that continues to influence how communities perceive the ruins.

Recognizing haunted folklore as intangible heritage shifts the focus from superstition to cultural expression. It emphasizes that such stories are not merely entertainment but also social narratives that explain the presence of ruins, transmit moral lessons, and preserve local memory. From a tourism perspective, this recognition legitimizes the inclusion of ghost stories in heritage interpretation. Instead of presenting tourists with only archaeological facts, heritage managers can integrate local narratives to create more immersive experiences.

In my own engagement with communities near Taxila, I have observed how such stories are deeply tied to identity and place. To ignore them in heritage discourse would be to silence a vital cultural voice. Thus, I argue that folklore must be treated as an integral part of the site’s intangible heritage, not as an accessory or superstition.

Postmodern Tourism and the Experience Economy

Haunted heritage tourism can also be analyzed through the lens of postmodern tourism. Postmodern theorists argue that tourists increasingly seek experiences rather than mere sightseeing (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) suggests that destinations compete by offering memorable, staged, and emotionally engaging encounters. Ghost walks, storytelling festivals, and immersive haunted tours fit directly into this model.

Taxila's haunted folklore can thus be positioned as part of the experienced economy, where tourists are not passive consumers but active participants in meaning-making. Listening to ghost stories under the moonlight at Jaulian, or exploring caves rumored to be cursed, provides emotional engagement that a standard archaeological lecture might not. This reflects postmodern tourists' desire for authenticity, novelty, and personal stories.

However, authenticity here must be understood not in the traditional archaeological sense of "truth" but in a more flexible, postmodern sense of "felt authenticity" (Wang, 1999). Even if the ghost stories cannot be historically verified, they feel authentic to communities and resonate with tourists who are seeking cultural immersion rather than factual accuracy. Personally, I believe this notion of "felt authenticity" is crucial in South Asian contexts, where oral traditions often carry as much cultural legitimacy as written history.

Community Narratives and Responsible Tourism

Finally, the framework of community-based tourism is essential for grounding haunted heritage development. Timothy and Boyd (2003) emphasize that heritage tourism must consider not only the material site but also the meanings attached by local communities. For Taxila, this means that haunted folklore cannot be simply packaged by outside agencies as a commercial product. Instead, it should be developed through community participation, ensuring that local voices are respected and economic benefits are shared.

Responsible haunted heritage tourism also requires balancing conservation concerns. As Khan (2019) notes, many of Taxila's sites are already vulnerable to erosion and unregulated human activity. Night tours or large-scale events could risk further damage unless strict management plans are in place. In my own view, this is where Pakistan's heritage policy needs to evolve by integrating both material and intangible concerns into tourism planning, rather than treating them separately.

Summary of Framework

Together, these theoretical perspectives dark tourism, intangible cultural heritage, postmodern experience economy, and community-based heritage management offer a balanced way to analyze haunted heritage in Taxila. They show that folklore is not peripheral but central to understanding how tourists engage with the ruins. They also remind us that any attempt to develop haunted heritage tourism must be sensitive to conservation, authenticity, and community empowerment. Most importantly, from my standpoint, these frameworks highlight that haunted heritage at Taxila is not about sensationalism, but about acknowledging and respectfully presenting a cultural imagination that has endured for generations.

Case Study: Haunted Folklore of Taxila

Taxila Valley, located about thirty kilometers north of Islamabad, is one of the most archaeologically rich landscapes of South Asia. It has been celebrated for its ancient urban centers, Buddhist monasteries, and stupas, but what often goes unrecorded in academic texts is the rich layer of folklore that surrounds the ruins. This case study highlights how Taxila's tangible remains are interwoven with intangible haunted narratives that local communities have preserved for generations. These narratives provide an opportunity to explore the idea of haunted heritage tourism in Pakistan while also raising questions about authenticity, conservation, and responsible interpretation.

Archaeological Significance of Taxila

Taxila was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980 for its “outstanding universal value” as a testimony to the evolution of urban settlement and religious development in South Asia. The valley contains more than fifty archaeological sites, ranging from the prehistoric caves at Khanpur to the urban centers of Bhir Mound (6th century BCE), Sirkap (Indo-Greek), and Sirsukh (Kushan). Religious monuments such as the Dharmarajika Stupa, Jaulian Monastery, Mohra Moradu, and the Bhamala Buddhist Complex highlight its role as a major center of Buddhist learning.

Yet beyond the archaeological remains, local oral traditions emphasize the mysterious and spectral qualities of the ruins. These haunted associations form part of Taxila’s intangible cultural heritage, adding a dimension of mystery and storytelling that complements its historical value.

However, despite its international recognition, large parts of Taxila remain under-explored due to limited resources and insufficient archaeological capacity. Many smaller sites lack systematic excavation or conservation, leaving them vulnerable to neglect and allowing folklore to fill the gaps where historical knowledge is incomplete.



Figure 1. General view of a stupa and monastery at Piplan, Taxila. Photograph by Author, 2025.

Haunted Narratives and Local Folklore

The haunted dimension of Taxila emerges most vividly in local stories attached to specific sites.

- **Mohra Moradu Monastery:** Villagers recount tales of spectral monks whose chanting can still be heard echoing through the ruins at night. Some believe the spirits are guardians of Buddhist wisdom, while others avoid the area after sunset.
- **Jaulian Monastery:** Known for its well-preserved stupas, Jaulian is also associated with monks who appear as shadowy figures. Locals say that their presence protects the sacred space from desecration.
- **Sirkap City:** The deserted Indo-Greek city, with its crumbling walls and eerie silence, is often described as cursed. Whispering voices are said to echo through its ruins, warning intruders of past tragedies.
- **Dharmarajika Stupa:** Legends circulate that treasures hidden beneath the stupa are guarded by spirits. Attempts to dig for gold are said to bring misfortune, reinforcing the sacredness of the site.



Figure 2. The Dharmarajika Stupa, Taxila. Local folklore suggests that treasures hidden beneath the mound are cursed. Photograph by Author, 2025.



Figure 3. Jaulian Monastery, Taxila. Local oral tradition speaks of spectral monks protecting the site. Photograph by Author, 2025.

In some cases, these stories have been manipulated by treasure hunters and illegal excavators, who deliberately spread ghost legends to keep locals away while they search for relics. Such practices not only distort authentic folklore but also pose serious threats to the archaeological integrity of the sites.

These narratives transform Taxila from a silent archaeological landscape into a living cultural space where memory, myth, and mystery interact.

Folklore as Intangible Heritage

According to UNESCO, intangible heritage includes oral traditions, rituals, and community practices that define cultural identity. The haunted stories of Taxila fall under this category. They have been passed down orally and remain alive among local communities who live near the ruins.

While archaeology provides a material history, folklore provides an emotional history that connects past and present. Haunted stories also offer an interpretive tool for tourism: they allow tourists to engage not only with the stones and ruins but also with the living beliefs that surround them.

Haunted Atmospheres and Tourist Experiences

In global tourism, haunted heritage has become a niche that appeals to tourists seeking immersive and emotional experiences. In places like York (UK), New Orleans (USA), and Delhi's Malcha Mahal (India), ghost walks and haunted heritage tours have successfully blended history with folklore.

Taxila, with its mix of sacred ruins and ghostly legends, has the potential to offer similar experiences. Unlike commercial haunted houses or artificial scare attractions, Taxila's folklore emerges organically from its long history and sacred landscapes. This gives its haunted heritage a reflective dimension, encouraging tourists to experience mystery and awe rather than mere entertainment.



Figure 4. Inner view of Khanpur cave, Taxila. Locals describe the site as haunted by whispers and shadows. Photograph by Author, 2025.

Community Perspectives

For local communities, haunted stories serve multiple purposes. Some use them as cautionary tales to protect sacred ruins from looting or disrespectful behavior. Others share them with pride as part of their cultural identity.

However, there is also ambivalence. While some villagers believe in the haunted dimension, others view it with skepticism or even fear that it could stigmatize the region. For any haunted heritage tourism initiative to succeed, it must involve communities as active partners, ensuring that their narratives are respected and not exploited.

Challenges for Haunted Heritage Tourism in Taxila

Developing haunted heritage tourism at a UNESCO site like Taxila presents several challenges:

- **Conservation:** Many ruins are fragile, and increased tourist traffic, especially at night, could damage them.

- **Authenticity:** Haunted narratives should complement, not overshadow, the archaeological importance of the valley.
- **Religious Sensitivity:** As many ruins are sacred Buddhist spaces, interpretation must remain respectful.
- **Risk of Sensationalism:** Over-commercializing haunted stories could trivialize the site's historical value.
- **Illegal Excavations:** Folklore has at times been exploited by looters, making regulation and monitoring essential.

Balancing these issues requires a responsible tourism strategy that integrates haunted heritage into broader heritage interpretation, perhaps through storytelling sessions, community-led guided tours, or digital media presentations rather than large-scale ghost walks.

DISCUSSION

The case of Taxila Valley demonstrates how haunted heritage can enrich the interpretation of archaeological sites, but it also highlights the complexities of integrating folklore into World Heritage tourism. Globally, haunted heritage has proven successful in attracting tourists and enhancing site narratives, yet its application in South Asia and particularly Pakistan remains underexplored.

Haunted Heritage as an Interpretive Tool

In many countries, haunted narratives serve as a bridge between historical knowledge and popular imagination. For example, York in the United Kingdom has become internationally known for its ghost walks, which blend medieval history with spectral storytelling (Hanks, 2015). Similarly, the haunted heritage of Malcha Mahal in Delhi has been revived through heritage walks, bringing attention to an otherwise neglected monument (Ancheary, Mehta, & Mondal, 2024). These cases demonstrate that haunted stories do not replace historical facts but instead provide a complementary lens that enhances the tourist experience.

Taxila, with its ancient monastery and deserted cities, has similar potential. Its haunted narratives offer an alternative way for tourists to connect with ruins that might otherwise appear lifeless or abstract. Rather than diminishing archaeological value, folklore can make the past feel immediate and emotionally resonant.

Positioning Taxila within Dark Tourism Debates

Taxila's haunted folklore falls on the lighter end of Stone's (2006) spectrum of dark tourism, closer to ghost tours and atmospheric storytelling than to sites of death and tragedy. This positioning is significant: it allows the site to be marketed in a way that emphasizes mystery and spirituality rather than morbidity. Unlike genocide memorials or disaster sites, haunted ruins can be approached with curiosity and imagination, making them accessible to a broader range of tourists.

At the same time, the case challenges the neat distinction between heritage and dark tourism. As scholars such as Hartmann (2014) and Richards (2001) argue, heritage itself is deeply entangled with death, memory, and identity. The haunted folklore of Taxila illustrates this entanglement: its stories are both cultural

heritage and forms of “light” dark tourism. This dual character requires a flexible interpretive approach that recognizes haunted narratives as legitimate cultural resources rather than trivial entertainment.

Tourist Demand and the Experience Economy

Tourists today often seek immersive experiences rather than passive observation. Haunted heritage aligns with this demand by offering sensory and emotional engagement. At Taxila, the ruins already evoke feelings of awe and mystery. Folklore amplifies this atmosphere, transforming the site into a multidimensional cultural landscape.

This is consistent with global trends in the “experience economy,” where tourists expect interactive and meaningful encounters (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Powell & Kennell, 2016). Incorporating haunted narratives into guided tours, night storytelling events, or digital heritage platforms could therefore increase Taxila’s appeal, especially among younger and international audiences.

Conservation and Ethical Concerns

Despite the potential benefits, there are significant risks in introducing haunted heritage tourism at Taxila. The valley’s ruins are fragile, and night tours or high tourist traffic could accelerate deterioration. Moreover, many of the sites are sacred Buddhist spaces, requiring respectful interpretation that avoids sensationalism.

Another pressing issue is that many sites in Taxila remain unexplored due to limited financial and technical resources. In these contexts, local folklore becomes even more significant, since it helps preserve cultural memory and draws attention to neglected ruins. If managed responsibly, haunted heritage tourism could help highlight lesser-known sites and even attract resources for research and conservation.

Equally concerning are the threats to illegal excavations. Treasure hunters sometimes manipulate ghost stories to discourage local people from approaching certain ruins, enabling looting activities. These fabricated narratives not only endanger archaeological integrity but also distort authentic folklore. Addressing this issue requires stronger monitoring, active community engagement, and awareness campaigns to protect both heritage and intangible traditions.

Community Involvement and Ownership

Local communities are the custodians of Taxila’s haunted folklore. Their participation is essential if haunted heritage tourism is to succeed. By involving villagers as storytellers, guides, or cultural interpreters, tourism initiatives can ensure authenticity while also generating economic benefits for local people.

However, exploitation must be avoided. Community narratives should be respected as part of intangible heritage, not commodified in ways that distort or ridicule local beliefs. Involving communities in decision-making and benefit-sharing will be crucial for ethical and sustainable tourism development.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the potential of haunted heritage as a new dimension in the interpretation of Taxila, one of Pakistan’s most significant archaeological landscapes. By combining folklore with tangible ruins, haunted narratives create opportunities to engage tourists in ways that are emotional, imaginative, and memorable. Rather than being seen as superstitions or distractions, these stories can serve as valuable cultural resources that connect past traditions with present tourism demands.

The discussion has shown that haunted folklore in Taxila aligns with global trends in the experience economy and lighter forms of dark tourism. Ghost stories, mysterious ruins, and local legends can be used to enhance the tourist experience while also strengthening the cultural value of sites that often appear static or remote. At the same time, the case of Taxila highlights the challenges of this approach. The fragility of monuments, the need for respectful interpretation of sacred spaces, and the risk of sensationalism must all be carefully managed.

Equally important are the issues of unexplored ruins and illegal excavations. Many of Taxila's sites remain under-researched due to limited resources, which increases the interpretive role of folklore while also leaving heritage vulnerable. On the other hand, the misuse of ghost stories by looters demonstrates how intangible traditions can be weaponized against both heritage and communities. These realities underline the importance of ethical management, stronger monitoring, and meaningful community participation.

For haunted heritage tourism to succeed in Taxila, it must therefore balance three goals: attracting tourists, conserving heritage, and empowering local communities. Initiatives that involve villagers as guides, storytellers, or cultural custodians could ensure that benefits are shared while authenticity is preserved. Moreover, positioning haunted heritage within Pakistan's broader tourism strategy could diversify offerings, making the country more appealing to international markets interested in cultural and experiential travel.

In conclusion, the haunted folklore of Taxila is not only a collection of ghost stories but also an underutilized cultural asset. If developed responsibly, it can contribute to heritage preservation, sustainable tourism, and cultural identity. At a time when Pakistan seeks new pathways for tourism growth, haunted heritage offers a unique opportunity to connect the mysteries of the past with the expectations of modern tourists.

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