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GEOJURISTODAY RESEARCH FOUNDATION

SPECIAL REPORT

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BEYOND POVERTY TOURISM

REASSESSING SLUM TOURISM THROUGH INDIA'S
NATIONAL SECURITY LENS

DHARAVI, DATA AND THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF OVERSIGHT



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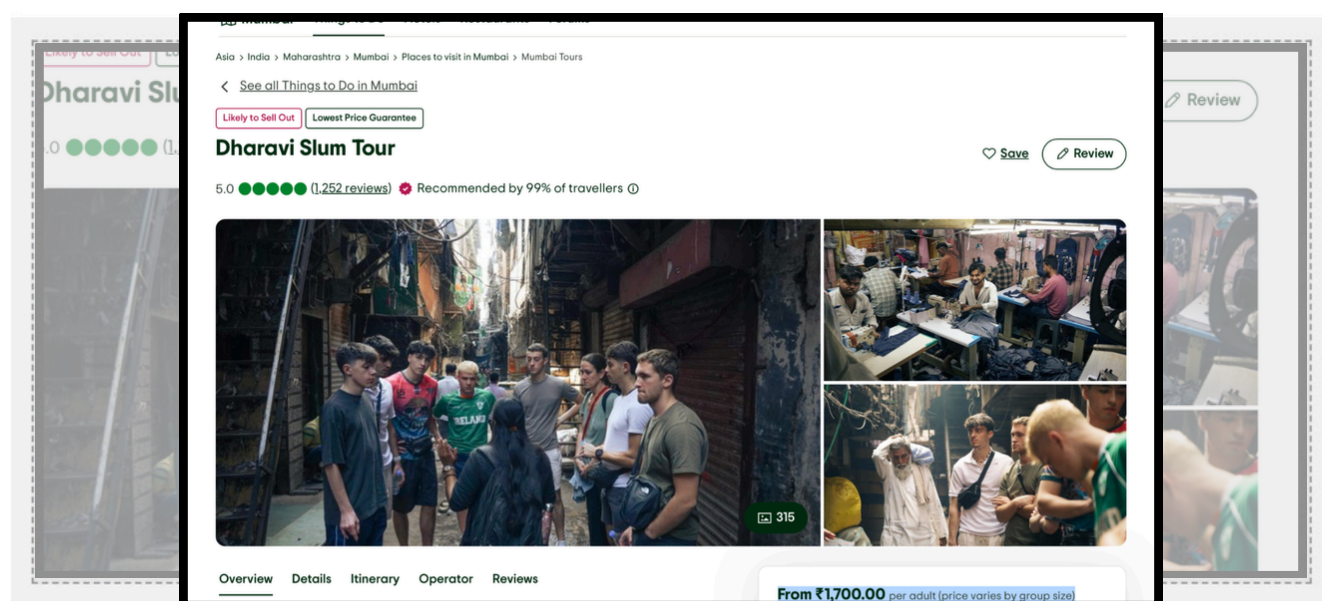
THE ARGUMENT IN ONE PARAGRAPH

Organised tours through Dharavi and comparable settlements have been debated for years as an ethical question. This report asks a different one: in an era of hybrid warfare, open-source intelligence and narrative competition, should foreign-led access to India’s most economically significant informal settlements remain governed by ordinary tourism law alone? The answer proposed is not prohibition but calibrated oversight, through operator registration, guide certification, consent-based photography and multi-agency coordination.

SPECIAL REPORT · I

From Poverty Tourism to Policy Question

The ethics of slum tourism have been debated for decades. Its security dimension has barely been discussed at all.



Thousands of foreign tourists visit Dharavi each year, guided through its narrow lanes, small-scale industries and densely populated neighbourhoods.

Slum tourism refers to organised, guided visits to urban areas characterised by poverty and informal settlements, where poverty and its associated social, economic, and spatial characteristics constitute a significant part of the tourist experience and attraction. This understanding draws on the work of Fabian Frenzel, who conceptualises slum tourism as tourism in which “poverty and associated signifiers become central themes and (part of) the attraction of the visited destination.”

For decades, Dharavi has occupied a unique place in the global imagination. Frequently portrayed as a symbol of resilience, enterprise, and the complexities of urban development, Mumbai’s sprawling informal settlement has attracted a steady stream of visitors from across the world. What began as a niche activity has evolved into a well-established segment of India’s tourism industry, with organised walking tours featuring in international travel itineraries, guidebooks, documentaries, university field visits, and online booking platforms. Thousands of foreign tourists visit Dharavi each year, guided through its narrow lanes, small-scale industries, and densely populated neighbourhoods under the promise of gaining an “authentic” understanding of urban India.

Although Dharavi remains India’s most internationally recognised and commercially developed destination for slum tourism, it is not the only informal settlement where organised tours are conducted. Similar community-based and educational tours are offered in Sanjay Colony in New Delhi, where guided walks through the settlement have become an established part of responsible tourism initiatives, and in Bhatta Basti in Jaipur, where visitors are introduced to local livelihoods and community development projects through organised tours.

FIGURE 1 · NO LONGER A DHARAVI-SPECIFIC PHENOMENON

Dharavi, Mumbai

India’s most internationally recognised and commercially developed slum tourism destination, on global itineraries and booking platforms.

Sanjay Colony, New Delhi

Guided walks established as part of responsible tourism initiatives.

Bhatta Basti, Jaipur

Visitors introduced to local livelihoods and community development projects through organised tours.

The existence of such initiatives across multiple Indian cities suggests that slum tourism is gradually evolving beyond a Dharavi-specific phenomenon into a broader niche within India’s experiential tourism sector. While these tours differ in scale and organisation, they collectively indicate that questions concerning governance, visitor management, transparency, and oversight are relevant not only to Mumbai but to organised access to informal settlements across the country.

The popularity of these tours has been driven by a combination of global curiosity, academic interest, and a growing market for experiential travel. Operators present these areas not merely as settlements marked by poverty but as thriving ecosystems of entrepreneurship, recycling, manufacturing, and community resilience. This narrative has earned international recognition and has helped reshape perceptions of these areas beyond conventional stereotypes. Consequently, organised tours have become an accepted feature of these places’ tourism landscape, attracting everyone from backpackers and journalists to researchers, students, diplomats, and social media creators.

For much of this period, public debate surrounding these tours has centred on ethics. Questions have focused on whether such visits commodify poverty, whether local communities receive meaningful economic benefits, and whether residents are treated with dignity and respect. These are important discussions, but they are no longer the only ones that deserve attention.

India's security environment has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. Heightened geopolitical competition, repeated terrorist incidents, border confrontations, rapid advances in surveillance technologies, and the growing use of non-kinetic instruments of statecraft have fundamentally altered how governments assess seemingly ordinary civilian activities. Around the world, policymakers increasingly recognise that information, data, infrastructure mapping, and social networks can possess strategic value alongside traditional military assets.

Should India continue to view foreign-led tours through one of its most economically significant informal settlements solely as a tourism activity, or is it time to examine them through the broader prism of national security?

In an era defined by hybrid warfare, intelligence competition, open-source intelligence (OSINT), Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), and increasingly sophisticated methods of data collection, activities that once appeared entirely benign are now routinely assessed for their potential strategic implications. Governments across the world have strengthened scrutiny over foreign investment, critical infrastructure, telecommunications, research collaborations, and digital platforms in recognition that civilian domains can be exploited for geopolitical purposes. Yet organised foreign access to complex urban environments such as Dharavi has remained largely outside this evolving security conversation.

This does not mean that tourists are spies, nor does it suggest that companies conducting these tours are engaged in unlawful activity. Rather, it asks whether India's regulatory framework has kept pace with the realities of twenty-first-century security. If New Delhi already imposes special access regimes for border regions, military installations, and other strategically sensitive locations, is there a case for considering whether certain economically vital urban spaces also warrant a proportionate degree of oversight? The issue is not one of restricting legitimate tourism, but of determining whether transparency, accountability, and security considerations should evolve alongside the changing character of modern geopolitical competition.

SPECIAL REPORT · II

Dharavi Within Mumbai's Strategic Geography

Any assessment of Dharavi must also consider its location within India's most strategically significant metropolitan region. Mumbai is not merely the country's financial capital; it is home to critical institutions including the Reserve Bank of India, the Bombay Stock Exchange, the National Stock Exchange, the Western Naval Command of the Indian Navy, Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders, major petroleum facilities, logistics hubs, rail networks, and one of India's busiest international airports. It also serves as a gateway for maritime trade through the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA) and Mumbai Port, making it central to India's economic and strategic infrastructure.



Dharavi sits between key transport corridors and commercial districts of India's most strategically significant metropolitan region.

FIGURE 2 · THE CITY AROUND THE SETTLEMENT

Critical institutions and infrastructure concentrated in the Mumbai metropolitan region.

Finance. Reserve Bank of India, Bombay Stock Exchange, National Stock Exchange.

Trade. Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority and Mumbai Port, gateways for maritime trade.

Defence. Western Naval Command of the Indian Navy, Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders.

Networks. Petroleum facilities, logistics hubs, rail networks and one of India's busiest international airports.

Dharavi occupies a geographically important position within this wider urban ecosystem. Situated between key transport corridors and commercial districts, it forms part of the complex metropolitan landscape through which people, goods, and services move every day. While the settlement itself is not designated as a protected installation, its proximity to nationally significant infrastructure reinforces the argument that discussions surrounding urban security should not be limited exclusively to military facilities or border regions. In an age where cities themselves are increasingly recognised as strategic spaces, the relationship between tourism, data collection, and urban resilience deserves closer examination.

A Regulatory Blind Spot

Unlike visits to India's Protected Areas or Restricted Areas, organised slum tours do not require a dedicated permit, security clearance, or specialised regulatory approval. Foreign tourists who enter India on valid visas are generally free to book these tours through commercial operators, just as they would reserve a heritage walk or food tour. There is no publicly documented national requirement for participant registration with security agencies, mandatory reporting of foreign visitors to local law enforcement, or a specialised licensing regime governing tours through informal settlements.

FIGURE 3 · TWO REGIMES OF FOREIGN ACCESS

Protected & Restricted Area Permits

Parts of the Northeast, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, areas close to international borders. Dedicated permits, security clearance, specialised approval.

Organised slum tours

No dedicated permit, no participant registration with security agencies, no reporting of foreign visitors, no specialised licensing regime. Booked like a heritage walk or food tour.

This stands in contrast to India's long-established Protected Area Permit (PAP) and Restricted Area Permit (RAP) systems, which regulate foreign access to strategically sensitive regions such as parts of the Northeast, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and areas close to international borders. These regimes reflect an accepted principle within India's security doctrine: unrestricted movement of foreign nationals may be subject to additional oversight where geography, sovereignty, or strategic considerations warrant it. While Dharavi is neither a border region nor a military installation, the absence of any comparable framework for one of India's most economically significant informal settlements raises a broader policy question. Should strategically important urban environments continue to be treated solely as ordinary tourist destinations, or should they receive a proportionate level of security-oriented oversight?

Vulnerabilities and Added Risks

Informal settlements that have become established slum tourism destinations present a unique set of security considerations alongside their social, economic, and cultural significance. Locations such as Dharavi in Mumbai, Kibera in Nairobi, Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, and the townships of Cape Town and Johannesburg attract thousands of domestic and international visitors annually. Their dense populations, intricate street networks, informal housing patterns, and high levels of daily movement can complicate conventional policing and intelligence gathering. While these communities are overwhelmingly inhabited by law-abiding residents and have become important centres of local enterprise and cultural exchange, security agencies have, on occasion, encountered individuals involved in criminal or extremist activities operating within or from such environments. In Mumbai, for example, Dharavi has featured in investigations following the 1993 Bombay serial bombings, wider Indian Mujahideen and SIMI investigations, the 2021 Pakistan-backed terror module case, and a 2022 terror-financing investigation conducted by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad. These cases illustrate how densely populated informal settlements may occasionally be exploited by individuals seeking anonymity or logistical advantages rather than indicating that the settlements themselves are centres of extremism.

Comparable security concerns have emerged in other internationally recognised slum tourism destinations, although the nature of the threats has varied. In Brazil, Rio de Janeiro's favelas, including Rocinha and Complexo do Alemão, have long posed challenges for law enforcement due to the presence of heavily armed organised criminal groups that have, at times, hindered police access and created environments where outsiders can move with limited oversight. In Kenya, informal settlements such as Kibera and Eastleigh have periodically been subject to counterterrorism operations following investigations into suspected Al-Shabaab recruitment, financing, and logistical support networks. Similarly, South African townships that attract heritage and community tourism have experienced security challenges associated with organised crime, illicit firearms, and gang activity, prompting increased policing during periods of heightened visitor activity. Although these cases involve different forms of security threats and should not be conflated with terrorism, they collectively demonstrate that densely populated informal settlements can present operational challenges for law enforcement because of their physical complexity, transient populations, and limited formal oversight.



Dense populations, intricate street networks and high daily movement complicate conventional policing and intelligence gathering.

FIGURE 4 · A PATTERN ACROSS FOUR CONTINENTS

Mumbai	Dharavi has featured in investigations from the 1993 serial bombings to a 2022 terror-financing case by the Maharashtra ATS.
Rio de Janeiro	Heavily armed organised criminal groups in favelas such as Rocinha have at times hindered police access, letting outsiders move with limited oversight.
Nairobi	Kibera and Eastleigh have periodically been subject to counterterrorism operations tied to suspected Al-Shabaab recruitment and financing networks.
South Africa	Townships attracting heritage tourism have faced organised crime, illicit firearms and gang activity, prompting increased policing during visitor peaks.

The continued growth of slum tourism adds another dimension to these security considerations by increasing the volume of interaction between local communities and foreign visitors. The overwhelming majority of these interactions contribute positively to local livelihoods, cross-cultural understanding, and community development. Nevertheless, from a security planning perspective, any location characterised by frequent international visitation, limited access control, and dense urban conditions requires proportionate regulatory oversight. Effective coordination between local police, municipal authorities, tour operators, and community organisations can improve visitor management, strengthen intelligence gathering, and facilitate the early identification of suspicious activity without undermining the economic or social benefits of tourism. Such measures are intended not to stigmatise informal settlements but to ensure that environments which combine high population density with substantial international footfall remain resilient against exploitation by organised criminal groups, foreign operatives, or extremist actors seeking to establish contacts or conceal their activities.

SPECIAL REPORT · III

Hybrid Warfare, Foreign Influence & Civilian Domains

Modern security policy no longer asks only what an activity is. It asks what it could be leveraged into.



Hybrid instruments of statecraft increasingly operate through legitimate civilian channels: digital platforms, media engagement, and people-to-people interactions.

Contemporary security challenges are increasingly defined by what strategic analysts describe as hybrid warfare, the use of military and non-military instruments in combination to influence, weaken, or shape the behaviour of another state. Alongside conventional military capabilities, governments now devote significant attention to cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, technology acquisition, and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). International organisations such as the European Union and NATO have identified FIMI as a growing challenge, referring to coordinated efforts by foreign actors to manipulate information environments, influence public perceptions, and exploit societal vulnerabilities through non-traditional means. These activities do not necessarily involve espionage or illegal conduct; they often operate through legitimate civilian channels, including digital platforms, academic exchanges, media engagement, cultural initiatives, and people-to-people interactions.

Within this broader context, organised tourism represents another form of civilian interaction that merits consideration, not because there is evidence that slum tours have been systematically exploited for hostile purposes, but because modern security policy increasingly evaluates how ordinary activities might be leveraged under particular circumstances. A precautionary approach therefore asks whether transparency regarding operators, funding sources, data practices, and foreign participation should be strengthened, rather than assuming that tourism falls entirely outside the scope of contemporary security planning.

The Chinese Agenda

Recent investigations by media researchers and disinformation analysts indicate that China has increasingly used coordinated online influence operations to shape international perceptions of India. These campaigns rely on English-language social media accounts, automated bot networks, and AI-assisted content distribution to amplify selective images and videos of Indian slums, poor sanitation, and urban deprivation. Rather than presenting a balanced picture of India's socio-economic landscape, the content disproportionately emphasises poverty to reinforce a "Third World" narrative that undermines India's growing economic stature, technological achievements, and geopolitical influence. Analysts have observed that such campaigns often intensify during periods of heightened bilateral tensions or when India achieves significant economic or diplomatic milestones, suggesting an effort to dilute positive international attention.

A notable contrast lies in how China portrays its own urban poverty. In 2021, the Chinese government declared that it had achieved a "comprehensive victory" over extreme poverty, effectively maintaining the official position that slums no longer exist in the country. However, many major Chinese cities continue to contain densely populated low-income settlements known as Chengzhongcun (urban villages), which accommodate millions of migrant workers in congested housing with ageing infrastructure and limited public services. Instead of calling these areas what they are, Chinese authorities describe them as transitional urban spaces scheduled for redevelopment. At the same time, China's extensive censorship apparatus restricts the circulation of content depicting domestic poverty, deteriorating neighbourhoods, or other conditions that could challenge the state's official development narrative, resulting in limited international visibility of these issues.



Chinese slums in Hangzhou (left) and Macau (right). Officially, such areas are “transitional urban spaces scheduled for redevelopment”.

The online discourse has increasingly become contested, with Indian social media users, independent commentators, and digital creators responding to narratives that portray India solely through the lens of poverty.

A Policy Gap Worth Debating

India has developed sophisticated mechanisms to regulate foreign access where national interests are considered particularly sensitive. Foreign visitors require permits for certain border regions; photography is restricted around defence installations; foreign investment in critical sectors is subject to security review; and infrastructure ranging from telecommunications to ports has come under greater scrutiny in response to evolving geopolitical risks. These measures reflect a broader shift towards integrating national security considerations into domains that were once viewed primarily through commercial or administrative lenses.

Organised slum tourism, however, remains regulated almost entirely under general tourism, business, and immigration laws. There is no dedicated national framework governing operator licensing, ownership disclosure, participant reporting, photography protocols, data management, or security oversight specific to foreign-led tours through dense informal settlements. This does not necessarily indicate a regulatory failure, nor does it imply that existing operators pose a security threat. It does, however, highlight a policy area that has received relatively little attention despite profound changes in the global security environment.

The central question is not whether slum tourism should be prohibited, but whether India should consider a calibrated framework.

The central question, therefore, is not whether slum tourism should be prohibited. Rather, it is whether India should consider a calibrated framework that balances legitimate tourism, community livelihoods, and educational exchange with greater transparency, accountability, and security awareness. As New Delhi continues to adapt its national security architecture to the realities of hybrid warfare and information competition, the debate over foreign access to strategically significant urban spaces may become increasingly difficult to ignore.

Poverty, Narrative Competition & Sharp Power

Beyond the collection of physical information, slum tourism intersects with another increasingly important dimension of national security: the contest over international narratives. Contemporary geopolitical competition is no longer confined to military or economic domains but increasingly extends to the information environment, where states seek to shape how rival countries are perceived globally. Information warfare has consequently emerged as a central component of modern conflict, involving the deliberate use of information, media, digital platforms, and strategic communication to influence perceptions, shape political behaviour, and advance national interests without resorting to conventional force.

This evolution is closely linked to the concept of Sharp Power, introduced by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, which describes how authoritarian states project influence not through attraction (soft power) or coercion (hard power), but by manipulating information environments, exploiting the openness of democratic societies, and distorting public perceptions. Unlike soft power, which seeks to win “hearts and minds,” sharp power seeks to shape narratives by selectively amplifying information, suppressing alternative viewpoints, and exploiting existing social and political vulnerabilities. China is frequently cited in the literature as a prominent practitioner of such influence techniques.

Recent developments demonstrate that tourism itself has become part of this wider information ecosystem. An investigation by India Today found that more than 100 Chinese social media accounts on Weibo and related platforms systematically amplified selectively edited videos of foreign travel influencers depicting India as dirty, unsafe, and underdeveloped. Positive portions of the original content were removed, while Chinese-language captions and commentary reframed the material for domestic audiences, illustrating how authentic tourism content can be repurposed to reinforce geopolitical narratives. This episode is significant not because it proves that tourism itself constitutes foreign interference, but because it demonstrates how material generated through legitimate civilian activities may subsequently be incorporated into broader information campaigns and thus weaponised.

FIGURE 5 · INFORMATION COMPETITION, BY THE NUMBERS

Documented instances of coordinated influence activity

100+

Chinese social media accounts found amplifying selectively edited videos of India as dirty, unsafe and underdeveloped. *India Today*, July 2025.

2.16m

Pieces of false or biased information originating from China in 2023 alone, per Taiwan's National Security Bureau.

5

Democracies, the EU, Australia, the US, the Philippines and Taiwan, that have publicly documented coordinated Chinese influence operations.

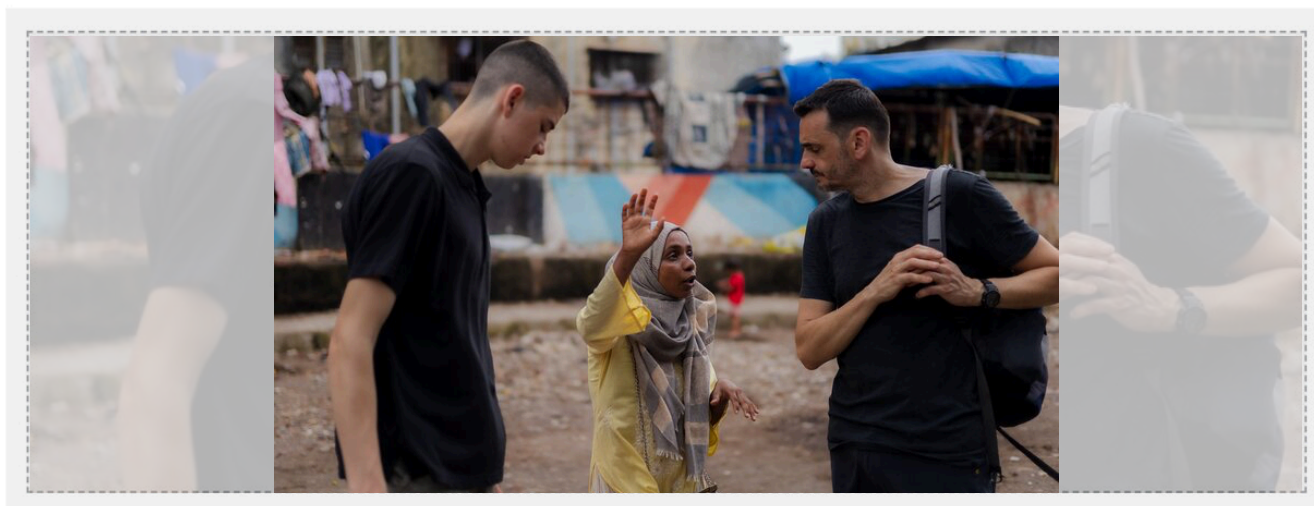
Concerns regarding Chinese information warfare are not confined to India. Taiwan has repeatedly accused Beijing of conducting coordinated disinformation campaigns designed to undermine public confidence in democratic institutions and influence elections, with Taiwan's National Security Bureau reporting more than 2.16 million pieces of false or biased information originating from China in 2023 alone. The European Union has similarly identified China as a source of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), while Australia, the United States and the Philippines have publicly documented instances of coordinated Chinese influence operations targeting media narratives, digital platforms and public opinion. These developments illustrate that information competition has become an increasingly recognised instrument of statecraft, reinforcing the need to assess how seemingly ordinary civilian activities and digitally generated content may be incorporated into wider narrative and influence campaigns.

Viewed through the lens of sharp power, Dharavi assumes significance beyond its role as a tourist destination. It is one of the most globally recognised visual representations of India. Images, videos, documentaries, and social media content produced through slum tourism contribute to the international information environment in which perceptions of India are formed. In an era where narrative competition has become an important dimension of national power, questions regarding transparency, ownership, digital dissemination, and regulatory oversight therefore merit consideration as part of India's broader information security and strategic communication framework.

SPECIAL REPORT · IV

Way Forward

Four proposals for a proportionate, risk-based framework that preserves the benefits of tourism while closing the governance gaps.



Registration, certification and coordination, not prohibition: oversight that preserves the educational and economic benefits of tourism.

01 Establish a Dedicated Regulatory Framework

Instead of treating organised slum tourism as an ordinary commercial tourism activity, the Government of India should introduce a dedicated regulatory framework for tours conducted within large informal settlements. Such a framework need not be as restrictive as the Protected Area Permit (PAP) or Restricted Area Permit (RAP) systems, but it should recognise that densely populated urban settlements with significant industrial activity and critical infrastructure require greater oversight than conventional tourist destinations. All tour operators should be required to register with the relevant state tourism authority, disclose their operational areas, maintain visitor records, and comply with prescribed regulatory standards. A registration-based system would create accountability while enabling authorities to monitor the growth and nature of this emerging tourism sector.

02 **Standardise Tour Operations and Guide Certification**

The Ministry of Tourism, in coordination with state governments, should formulate comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) governing slum tourism. These SOPs should define approved routes, maximum group sizes, permissible activities, emergency response protocols, and documentation requirements. In addition, all tour guides should undergo identity verification and obtain certification through an approved licensing mechanism. Certified guides should receive training on ethical tourism, visitor safety, privacy norms, local laws, and basic security awareness. Such measures would professionalise the industry, improve visitor experience, and reduce the possibility of irresponsible or unauthorised operations.

03 **Introduce Proportionate Security and Privacy Safeguards**

The current absence of clear rules governing photography, videography, and foreign-led tours represents a significant regulatory gap. The government should issue detailed guidelines distinguishing legitimate tourism activities from practices that may compromise privacy or security. Photography of sensitive infrastructure, industrial facilities, utility installations, or locations identified by security agencies should be prohibited, while photography of residents should be strictly consent-based. Similarly, commercial tours organised or led by foreign nationals or overseas organisations should be subject to enhanced reporting requirements, periodic compliance audits, and greater transparency regarding their activities. These measures would strengthen accountability without discouraging responsible international tourism.

04 **Strengthen Local Oversight Through Multi-Agency Coordination**

An effective regulatory framework should also integrate local police, district administrations, municipal authorities, and tourism departments into a coordinated oversight mechanism. Registered operators should notify local authorities about regular tour schedules and cooperate during inspections or investigations whenever required. Periodic compliance checks can ensure adherence to licensing conditions, visitor management protocols, and security guidelines. Rather than relying on blanket restrictions, this collaborative model would enable authorities to identify risks, respond quickly to security concerns, and protect both residents and visitors. A proportionate, risk-based regulatory approach would preserve the educational and economic benefits of slum tourism while addressing the governance gaps that currently exist.

Foreign Examples: Regulatory Responses to Slum Tourism and Lessons for India

BRAZIL · COMMUNITY-BASED REGULATION & CONTROLLED ACCESS

Brazil's favela tourism, particularly in Rio de Janeiro's Rocinha and Santa Marta, has gradually evolved from an informal activity into a more regulated model that emphasises community participation and operational oversight. Tours are increasingly conducted by certified local guides who possess knowledge of the area's social and security dynamics, while operators generally follow designated routes and avoid neighbourhoods affected by criminal activity. Visitors are encouraged to seek consent before photographing residents, and many tour operators collaborate with local businesses and community initiatives to ensure that tourism generates direct economic benefits for residents. The emphasis has been on making tourism accountable through regulation rather than restricting access altogether.

Lessons for India. Mandatory registration of slum tour operators, certification and verification of guides, designated tour routes, and photography guidelines based on informed consent would improve accountability, reduce security vulnerabilities, and ensure that local communities benefit directly from tourism activities.

SOUTH AFRICA · ACCREDITATION & RESPONSIBLE TOURISM STANDARDS

South Africa has addressed the challenges associated with township tourism by emphasising professional standards and responsible tourism practices. Tour operators are encouraged to register with tourism authorities, while guides undergo formal training in visitor safety, ethical conduct, and cultural sensitivity. Responsible tourism policies promote visitor codes of conduct that discourage intrusive photography and encourage respectful interaction with residents. In addition, partnerships between tour operators and local enterprises are encouraged so that tourism revenues contribute to community development rather than benefiting only commercial operators.

Lessons for India. A national accreditation mechanism for slum tourism operators, Standard Operating Procedures, mandatory guide certification, and a code of conduct for visitors would professionalise the sector while ensuring ethical tourism practices and greater community participation.

KENYA · COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION & VISITOR MANAGEMENT

In Kenya, organised visits to Kibera are increasingly coordinated through community organisations and local non-governmental groups instead of being left entirely to commercial operators. Tours are generally arranged in advance, accompanied by local guides or community representatives, and integrated with educational and community development initiatives. Particular emphasis is placed on protecting residents' dignity through consent-based photography policies, minimising intrusive visitor behaviour, and ensuring that local communities play an active role in tourism management.

Lessons for India. Requiring consultation with resident welfare groups before authorising organised tours, advance scheduling, greater involvement of local stakeholders, and consent-based photography norms would improve transparency, protect residents' privacy, and foster trust between operators and communities.

PHILIPPINES · PRIVACY PROTECTION & LOCAL COORDINATION

The Philippines has adopted a cautious approach towards tourism in informal settlements such as Smokey Mountain and Tondo by promoting organised educational visits under the supervision of local organisations and community leaders. Visitor access is generally pre-arranged, local escorts accompany tour groups, and photography involving children or other vulnerable individuals is subject to strict ethical expectations and community consent. This approach seeks to balance educational tourism with the protection of residents' privacy, dignity, and safety.

Lessons for India. Advance notification of organised slum tours to local authorities, clear legal guidelines regulating photography of vulnerable populations, and greater coordination between tour operators, municipal bodies, and local police would strengthen oversight without undermining the educational and economic benefits of slum tourism.

Conclusion

Slum tourism can no longer be assessed on ethical grounds alone. Dharavi and comparable settlements now sit at the intersection of urban density, critical infrastructure, data capture and global narrative competition, yet remain governed by ordinary tourism law. The answer is not prohibition, which would penalise the communities that benefit from it, but calibrated oversight through operator registration, guide certification, consent-based photography and multi-agency coordination. India already regulates foreign access where strategic interests demand it. Its most visible urban spaces deserve the same considered attention.

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