

TOURISM POTENTIAL IN SOUTHERN HIMACHAL- A CASE STUDY OF SIRMOUR DISTRICT

Jagpal Singh Tomar*

*Center for Climate Change and Water Research, Suresh Gyan Vihar University, Jaipur

*jagpal.61881@mygyanvihar.com

ABSTRACT:

Himachal Pradesh is endowed with nature's bounty and has always attracted the fascination of tourists who flock to this hilly state in large numbers to enjoy its pristine beauty. It all started with Britishers who moved to these hills attracted by its natural beauty and cool climate, even declared Shimla as their Summer Capital in 1864 placing the state firmly on the world tourist map and this state has not looked back ever since. The flow of tourists here has increased dramatically ever since. But this movement has remained more or less confined to a select historically famous tourists spots in and around Shimla, Kullu, Chamba and Mandi. The main reason for this approach was that govt of the days focussed on developing these already known spots for attracting tourists which needed fewer resources, resulting in the overlooking of places with potential for attracting tourists. Nowadays, overcrowding at these popular spots has forced tourists to look for new unexplored territories and hence districts of Lahaul & Spiti, Kinnaur etc. are seeing increased flow of tourists. In this paper, I would like to focus on the hitherto less explored district Sirmour of Himachal Pradesh as the perfect destination for visitors looking for new places for recreation.

Keywords: Tourism, Destination, Wetland, Sanctuary, Culture, Heritage and Fossils.

INTRODUCTION

There is a great potential for tourism in Himachal Pradesh. Its unique customs, traditions, cultural and above all the natural attractions and topography provide excellent opportunities for tourism development (Kanga et al., 2011). It abounds in temples with distinct hill architecture that would certainly attract many visitors. Mother nature has

gifted this state with snow-capped mountains, glaciers, lakes, geysers, beautiful valleys, thick coniferous forests with large variety of flora and fauna, which provides wide scope for the development of tourism (Kanga et al., 2014). Some important tourist destinations in the state are Shimla, Manali, Dharamshala, Khajjiar, Chamba,

Dalhousie etc. Nowadays, overcrowding at these famous spots has diverted the tourist flow towards less explored territories and hence places in districts of Lahaul & Spiti, Kinnaur etc. are seeing increased flow of tourists. The success of tourism business in a region depends on tourism planning, its development and marketing (Chandel, R. S., and Kanga, S., 2018). District Sirmour in Himachal Pradesh is one such place with high tourist potential sites waiting to be explored. Despite having all the characteristics of a good tourist destination, this district has lagged behind due to govt apathy and lack of basic infrastructure, prerequisites for attracting tourists. But now the situation is rapidly changing as there is a marked improvement in facilities available due to govt shifting their focus away from almost saturated traditional regions to developing and promoting new areas with potential of becoming tourist hotspots.

Sirmour district is the southern-most district of Himachal Pradesh located in the Shivalik range of Himalayas. It is one of the twelve administrative districts of Himachal. Its geographical extent lies between 30° 22' 00'' to 31° 01' 00'' North Latitude and 77° 01'12'' to 77°

49'40'' East Longitude having a total area of 2825 sq. kms. The district of Solan lies on its West while Shimla district lies on its North. It is bound by the state of Uttarakhand towards East, by Uttar Pradesh & Haryana towards South. Nearest Airport is located at Chandigarh whereas the nearest railway station is at Ambala & Chandigarh. The district is well connected by road network with national high way number 72 passing through the district. Sirmour district presents an intricate mosaic of high mountain ranges, hills and valleys with altitude ranging from 300 to 3000 m above MSL. There is gradual rise in elevation from south to north and from east to west. In general, trans-Giri terrain exhibits highly rugged mountain terrain. The high peaks in Chaurdhar region remain snow covered for most part of the year. Low denuded hill ranges of Siwalik represent the southwestern part of the district. Paonta valley, trending NW-SE, has an area of about 230 sq km and lies between the main Himalayan ranges on the north and outer Siwalik hill range in the south.

Places to visit in Distt-Sirmour

This district has some very significant religious places like the temples of Ma Renuka ji, Ma Balasundari, Shirgul

Maharaj, Ma Bhangayani, Bhurshing Maharaj, Gurudwaras at Paonta Sahib, Bhangani Sahib, Baru Sahib etc. Some very scenic places include Renukaji lake & zoo, Haripurdhar, Churdhar, Peach Valley, Habban Valley, etc. Shivalik Fossil Park located here is one of a kind not only in India but whole of Asia if not world.

Renuka lake

Renuka lake is the largest natural lake of Himachal Pradesh located in about 38 kms east of Nahan in Sirmour district. This elevation of this lake is 672 m above mean sea level and its circumference is about 3214 m. This place is considered as the birthplace of Lord Parshuram, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the lake derives its name from goddess Renuka, his mother. It is a designated Ramsar site since November 2005 (Ramsar *Sites Information Service*, Kumar et al 2019). This lake has boating facility and is well connected by road. The area around this lake is a Reserve Forest out of which 4.028 km² has been converted into a sanctuary. This sanctuary boasts of a lion safari and a zoo consisting of leopards, black bears, cheetals, wild cats etc. A bird sanctuary is also located here. An area of roughly about 3 km² that lies

outside the sanctuary has been declared as a buffer belt. According to forest types classification, the area falls under dry mixed deciduous forest and dry Sal forest. This place is the site of an annual international fair held in November known as Renuka fair which attracts people from within the district, the neighboring district of Shimla, adjoining parts of Haryana and Jhonsar & Bhabar areas of Uttarakhand. Tourists can visit this place for religious or recreational purposes.

Ma Balasundari Temple, Trilokpur

Trilokpur is a place of great religious importance located on a hillock about 24 km south-west of Nahan at an elevation of about 430 m. The temple of Ma Balasundari here is an amalgam of Indo-Persian styles of architecture. It is considered to be the childhood place of Maa Vaishno Devi. This temple was built in marble by Sh Ram Dass, a local trader with help from the Maharaja of earstwhile Sirmour state in 1573 AD. In 1823, the temple was renovated by Maharaja Fateh Prakash and by Maharaja Raghubir Prakash in 1851. Since the temple's inception, the descendants of Lala Ram Dass have been performing the main Puja here. An important fair is held at Trilokpur twice a year i.e. during

navratras in the months of Chaitra and Ashvina. This temple attracts a lot of pilgrims annually from all over Northern India. Mata Bala Sundri is the Kul Devi of many Castes (i.e. Brahmana, Baniyas, Rajput etc.) in Himachal and Haryana. Hence this place can be promoted as a religious place of very high significance.

Shivalik Fossil Park,

Also known as **Suketi Fossil Park**, (Chatterjee, R., 1974) this park is situated in the picturesque Markanda Valley of the Shivalik hills of district Sirmour located 20 kms to the south of Nahan. It is Asia's biggest fossil park and is a notified National Geo-heritage Monument fossil park (Ministry of Mines Press release, 2016) developed by the Geological Survey of India, in collaboration with the Himachal Pradesh government. The park, extensively forested, is spread out over an area of 1.5 square kilometres (0.58 sq mi) at Suketi. (Geological Survey of India). This park is the first one in Asia to be situated on the same site where the actual fossils were unearthed, and has a collection of vertebrate fossils and skeletons that date back to the Plio-Pleistocene period (2.5 million years ago). The park facilitates international studies in this field by research scholars, who visit the park

from different parts of the globe (Singh, R. B., and Anand, S.) and plays an instrumental role in generating public awareness about this field of study and enquiry. The park has a display of the fossil finds and an open-air exhibition of six life-sized fibreglass models of extinct mammals i.e. Huge land tortoise, gharial, four-horned giraffe, sabre-toothed tiger, large tusked elephant, and hippopotamus. (*The Tribune*. 2003 and Mukerji, A. B., 1992). A museum, within the precincts of the park exhibits stone items belonging to Early Paleolithic Man. Also preserved in the museum are fossils of two genera of extinct primates, *Sivapithecus* and *Ramapithecus*. (Geological Society of France 1994 and Aitken, B., 2003). The museum also houses the remains of Asia's oldest human ancestor and other antiquities unearthed by Captain Cautley in the area (Geological Society of France 1994). The site has been developed to give a panorama of Plio-Pleistocene period (2.5 million years ago) through massive afforestation which has provided a green cover to the Park besides enhancing its beauty. It is a site worth visiting for Geoscientists, Paleoscientists and general public.

Simbalbara National Park

This park is located in the Paonta Valley

of Sirmour district, Himachal Pradesh, along its border with Haryana and is spread over an area of about 27.88 square kilometres (10.76 sq mi). This park was initially created as a protected area in 1958, then known as the Simbalbara Wildlife Sanctuary, with an area of 19.03 km². In 2010, 8.88 km² area was added to it and it was made into a National Park. (Department of Forest, Government of Himachal Pradesh, July 2010, and Sharma, A., 2011). The vegetation consists of dense Sal forests with grassy glades (Kanga et al., 2013). There is a perennial stream in the valley. The Travel and Tourism department of Himachal Pradesh has preserved the park in its natural form (Simbalbara sanctuary@surfindia.com). Goral, Sambhar, Chittal, Indian Muntjac, Wild Boar, Rhesus Macaque, Indian Muntjac, Crested Porcupine, Langurs, Himalayan Black Bear, and Leopard etc. are the common animals found here. There are walking trails also in the adjoining forests. October and November are the best times to visit the park (<https://himachaltourism.gov.in>).

Churdhar Peak & Sanctuary

Churdhar Peak with an elevation of 3,647 metres (11,965 feet) is the highest peak in the outer Himalayas, located on the

boundary of district Sirmour and Shimla. It is famous for dense Coniferous forests, serene valleys and abode of Shirgul maharaj, a local deity revered highly by the people of Sirmour, Choupal, Shimla, Solan and Jhonsar and Bhabar areas of Uttarakhand. There are two main routes to reach this peak which are normally preferred by people visiting this place. First one is a 14 km long trek with moderate climb from Nohradhar in district Sirmour and another one is 8 km steep climb from Sarahan in district Shimla (himachaltourism.gov.in, 2010). Other routes include the ones from Haripurdhar and Rajgarh, both lying in district Sirmour, and many more. Surrounding this peak is a sanctuary spread over an area of 56.16 square kilometres as notified on 15 November 1985. Churdhar Wildlife Sanctuary (CWS) is one of the few remaining citadels of biodiversity that covers wide altitudinal ranges (Subramani et al., 2014). The densely forested area is composed of mixed coniferous forests type interspersed with vast plantations of Kharu Oaks (Kanga et al., 2014). There is an abundance of cedar, blue pine and spruce giving these forests a lush green colour. This region is also home to a wide variety of medicinal herbs. Fauna

found here includes Leopard, Himalayan Black Bear, Gorals, Indian Muntjac, Canine teethed Musk Deer, Langurs, Monal Pheasant, Kalijj Pheasant, Red Jungle Fowl, etc. This place attracts pilgrims, nature lovers and adventure seekers alike.

Haripurdhar Valley and Ma Bhangani Temple

Haripurdhar is a small hilly town in Sirmour district surrounded by thick coniferous forests on the one side and mixed deciduous oak forest on the other, situated at its northern borders with district Shimla. It This town is at a distance of about 86 kms from Nahan and 100 kms from Solan at an altitude of 2500 metres above sea level. It is situated on a high ridge overlooking a deep valley. One can enjoy cool temperatures of 10° to 15° during summers and thick white blanket of snow during winters. This place is full of scenic beauty and greenery.

Another important attraction of this place is the temple of Maa Bhangayani, situated atop a hill about 2 kms away from here towards Chaupal. The location of this temple is such that it gives a 360° view of the beautiful valley surrounding this area. This deity is famous for fulfilling the wishes of its devotees,

hence very popular among people who come here from far of places from within and outside state. Due to its beautiful setting and high religious importance, this town has the potential of attracting tourists in large numbers.

The Habban Valley

The Habban Valley is a nature's paradise and hitherto unexplored area located in the Rajgarh Development of District Sirmour, at a distance of 70 km from Solan. Also known as the Peach Valley, this lush green area is situated at an elevation of 2000 mts surrounded by dense coniferous forests. The weather is usually pleasant around the year. The wildlife in the area consists of Goral, Barking Deer, Himalayan Black Bears, Musk Deer, Leopard. There are also various trails within Habban Valley which include a 7-km trek to Banalidhar or take a longer trek (15 km) to Churdhar. Habban is located only 10 kms away from neighbouring Shaya village which contains the shrine of highly revered Shirgul Devta. Habban valley contains thick coniferous and oak forests, as well as orchards of apples and peaches. This place is an excellent destination for people looking for secluded virgin valleys.

Baru Sahab

In the hills of district sirmour at about 60 km from Nahan, there was a village Baru presently called Baru Sahib, which is the home to an internationally acclaimed University called the Akal Academy. It all started with the vision of Sant Attar Singh Ji, Mastuane Wale (1866–1927), who, in the early twentieth century envisaged a place in the Himalayas from where young souls equipped with the amalgam of spiritual and modern scientific education will spread the message of universal brotherhood throughout the world. In 1959, 82 years old Sant Teja Singh Ji accompanied by 15-20 devotees set up camp and built a mud-hut, in which began the first Akhand Path. In 1986, the now famous Akal Academy had its beginning in the Ashram building with just five students which has now grown into an 11-storeyed building and has 1538 boys and girls on its rolls. Of these, 200 are overseas students; 100 from the US alone. 350 students are getting free education. This place is a perfect example of how people from completely different religions, culture, language and social backgrounds can live in complete harmony with each other. This place is a must visit to tourists of all faiths.

Bhureshwar Mahadev Temple

This temple is located on a beautiful hilltop which is a part of the Shivalik foothills just 2 kms off the National Highway No. 907A at Kwagdhara near Sarahan (Pachhad), district Sirmour. It is about 48 kms from Nahan, 40 kms from Solan and 68 kms from Chandigarh. These foothills provide a majestic view of the Himalayas on one side and the never-ending vast plains on the other. There is a legend about this place that from here Mata Parvati and Lord Shiva saw the Kurukshetra War, as described in the *Mahabharata*. Chandigarh is clearly visible from here. This place is also suitable for adventurous activities and is an ideal camping site. Due to its beautiful natural setting and location on National Highway with proximity to Chandigarh, this place has enormous scope for development as a prominent tourist spot.

SCOPE OF THIS STUDY:

1. District Sirmour has lagged behind in attracting tourists as compared to some of the more popular districts like Shimla, Kullu, Chamba, etc. Through this study, I want to put things in perspective and promote this district as a worthy option to the overcrowded popular tourist destinations of the state.
2. Through this study, I would also like to

draw the attention of the State Government towards these potential tourist destinations mentioned above, which have not been on the must visit list of the tourists coming to this state till now. But with some help from the govt. with regards to improvement in infrastructure, all this can change for good.

3. Migration to industrial areas of Paonta Sahib, Kala Amb, Nalagarh and Baddi in search of jobs is a common trend in the rural areas of this district. Increased tourist inflow to the district will result in employment opportunities to the people near home. This study aims at not only stopping this outflow but also ultimately reversing the trend in the long run.

CONCLUSION:

It can be safely concluded that district Sirmour is a richly endowed region having all the ingredients needed for becoming a prominent tourist destination. The main reasons for its lagging behind are poor infrastructure due to govt. apathy and lack of entrepreneurship among the local residents. With Govt. support and willingness at the local level, this district can become a tourist destination. It will act as a source of livelihood to the unemployed youth and add to the state

exchequer by way of taxes earned. Hence, proper planning and efficient execution at all levels from state to village level is required for transforming this district into a much sought-after tourist destination.

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