

Detailed Analysis Of Potential Of Tourism Attractions In Pahalgam Valley

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Abstract

Tourism is the backbone of the economy of Kashmir valley. There are so many enchanting tourist destinations distributed among all parts of the valley to meet the variegated demands of all kinds of tourists. Pahalgam is one such destination which caters to huge tourist influx throughout the year. Pahalgam valley has a huge potential for all types of tourism activities. The activities range from religious to adventure tourism. The vast meadowlands, the sparkling Lidder River, the sleety glaciers and the breathtaking trails en route the Amarnath Cave makes it a complete package. A lot of efforts are underway to make Pahalgam a world class tourist destination but the difficult climatic conditions and the uncertainty in the will of political class are always major hurdles.

Keywords: *Tourism, Attractions, Development, Pahalgam valley, Bey Tab Valley*

Introduction

Pahalgam is a town and a notified area committee in Anantnag district of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. It is a popular tourist destination, and every year a huge number of tourists visit Pahalgam. This world famous hill station is 40 km from the District Headquarters at Anantnag and 90 km from summer capital Srinagar. Located on the banks of Lidder River at an altitude of 7200 ft. above sea level, Pahalgam is one among the five tehsils of Anantnag district and tehsil headquarters are located in the main town of Pahalgam. It was once a favorite place for shooting of Bollywood films, and is still a health resort and a great attraction to domestic as well as International tourists. Besides tourist huts, several hotels in private sector have come up here and these hotels provide modern facilities to their guests. A number of treks in this region also begin from Pahalgam, as the 35 km trail traverses through pinewoods to the spectacular Kolahoi Glacier. Pahalgam is also associated with the annual Amarnath Yatra. Chandanwari 16 km from Pahalgam is the starting point of the yatra that takes place every year in the period of July to August. The road from Pahalgam to Chandanwari is on fairly flat terrain and can be undertaken by car. From Chandanwari onwards the trek becomes much steeper, and is accessible by foot or by pony.

At the confluence of the streams flowing from the river Lidder and Sheshnag Lake, Pahalgam was in the yore a shepherd's village with breathing views. Now it is Kashmir's premier health resort. Cool even during the heat of summers and meeting the variegated demands of all lovers of nature, sublime beauty and adventure. Hotels and lodges to all preferences and budgets from luxurious to unpretentious trekkers. Lodges including JKTDC's delightfully romantic, fully furnished huts

particularly concealed by giant pine trees are available. Pahalgam offers its visitors more fun and numerous places of interest that no other place in valley can boast of. Around Pahalgam there are many places of interest and made it a base. There are several historical places of great importance. Trekking routes and high altitude Lakes with springs offer the opportunity for adventure. These water bodies offer virgin and panoramic view and novel vistas bestowed by nature.

Pahalgam has a 9-hole golf course at 2400m above sea level and up gradation work for 18-hole is in progress. The Lidder River has excellent fishing boats for brown trout. The Valley is surrounded by snow-covered mountains peaks, dense pine and deodar forests with River Sheshnag originating from Sheshnag Lake (Holy Amarnath cave area) flowing majestically through it. The Sheshnag River moves to join River Lidder just 7 kms below at Pahalgam. Tourism is considered back bone to the economy of Pahalgam area. World over, tourism in modern era is considered one of the main avenue of employment generation, economic development, cultural exchange etc. Most of the tourist centres have single or unique attraction from heritage, pilgrimage, infrastructure, natural beauty, etc; but Pahalgam has combination of all the attractions from natural beauty, pilgrimage, heritage, cultural, handicraft.

Objectives

- To analyze the existing and potential tourist destinations in and around Pahalgam valley.
- To highlight the scope of various forms of tourist activities in pahalgam.
- To suggest measures for the improvement of tourism facilities and services in pahalgam.

Research methodology

Data Collection

The project information and the data would be summarized by a combination of both primary and secondary data collection methods. The primary source for the collection of data will be interviews of local people and visitors of different genders, income groups, professions and age groups. Personal survey at different tourist destinations based on questionnaire, information collected through e-mail of key executives etc; are some other sources of collection of primary data. The sources for the secondary data will be records of J&K Tourism department, JKTDC, Pahalgam Development Authority, Ministry of Tourism Govt. of India as well as reports of various agencies responsible for tourism development.

The other sources which include Newspapers, Magazines, Journals, Books, research articles and different relevant websites have also been considered for data collection.

Review of Literature

Growth of tourism industry for developing incomes and employment has remained an unpredictable feature. Growth in tourist inflow also continues to vary in direct relations to the political situation. To develop the destination for the visitors in pahalgam, advance planning in each sector of the industry for the opening of new facilities is a must. If this is not kept in right perspective there can be no

planning for future (Dr. Ahmed N. 2013 pp.2). To develop Pahalgam into a world class tourist spot all the stakeholders need to be educated and execution of plans is mandatory to achieve goals (Falade G.O 2008). The Pahalgam Himalayas have earned world reputation as a famous tourist hill resort. This tourist resort has assumed additional importance as it stands en-route to Amarnath cave which receives huge number of pilgrims every year (Sugarman 1994). Tourism in Pahalgam valley remained quite vulnerable to even small changes. This is evident since the year 1995, when five western tourists were kidnapped from different locations of Pahalgam by unidentified armed men to vanish in the mountains forever (Clarke C.S and Levy A. 2013).

This episode depicts insecurity among western travellers to visit the place. But the political situation has improved over a period of time. The development of tourism in Pahalgam is immense from last few years. The creation of amusement parks and development of nine hole golf course is a value addition. Another developmental activity is skiing which is relatively new phenomenon to Pahalgam (www.jktdc.co.in). Several hotels in private sector have come up in Pahalgam and these hotels provide modern facilities to their guests. A number of treks in this region also begin from Pahalgam, as the 35 km trail traverses through pinewoods to the spectacular Kolahoi glacier (Ahmed N. & Hashmi N H. 1974). Historically Pahalgam has a great importance. It was a popular attraction in ancient times as well as in middle and modern history of India starting from Mughals, Afghans and Sikhs to the end of Britishers etc. Mughals were so fond of Kashmir that they constructed Mughal Road from Delhi to Srinagar and developed many gardens in Kashmir. The Mughal Gardens of Kashmir are testimony of their love for Kashmir (Chowdhary S. 2014). The sparkling streams, the happy murmuring of icy brooks, the limpidity of its sleety lakes and the sublime beauty of mountains, the splendour of snow covered sunny mountains, the flower laden high lands and meadows etc; these all variegated beauties of flora and geographical locations were variously described by travellers and authors. Pahalgam is probably the most popular hill resort of the valley where one can romance with nature for endlessly (Sugarman 1994 Kashmir: Paradise lost).

Existing and upcoming tourism attractions in Pahalgam

Three broad tourist potential regions with different characteristics have been identified in Pahalgam valley.

i) Pahalgam valley and Surroundings:

This region comprises of Pahalgam and Baisaran with both natural and artificial tourist attractions. The essential tourist infrastructure is present only here. This region is used as a base camp for trekking and onward journey to Amarnath cave. Pahalgam is guarded by fir covered mountains, flower strewn pastures, beautiful parks (Poshwan Park, Lidder View Park, Amusement park) and white transparent water of Lidder River. The surroundings are ideal and allow for relaxation and leisure in the true spirit of a traditional hill station holiday. The important tourist destinations in this region are Pahalgam club, Mamal (named after a Shiva temple, which is considered to be one of the oldest existing temples in Kashmir), Shikargah and Baisaran.

Pahalgam club: The Pahalgam club was completely damaged in a devastating blaze in 2005 due to short circuit. The reconstruction of the gutted Pahalgam Club building is under execution through the

Engineering Wing of the Tourism Development Corporation. The project is located in the heart of Pahalgam resort on the bank of river Lidder and left hand side of Pahalgam Chandanwari road. This Tourist Facilitation Centre is under construction on a piece of land measuring 10000 Sqm. The project consists of 3 blocks, namely:-

- I. Main Block, which comprises of Reception and Auditorium blocks which are interlinked with each other.
- II. Health Block.
- III. Guest Block.

Betaab valley: Betaab Valley is a very popular tourist destination. It derived its name from the Sunny Deol and Amrita Singh starrer Bollywood movie “Betaab”. Earlier, the valley was known as Hajan Valley and was named Betaab only after the release of the movie. The valley is located at a very short distance from Pahalgam. Betaab Valley is also a favourite campsite of travellers as it also serves as a base camp for trekking and further exploration of the mountains. The valley is on walk-able distance from Pahalgam. The crystal clear & chilly water of the stream bubbling down from the snowy hills is a delight. Locals here drink this water too. There is a beautiful garden in the valley, with a bridge to cross the stream. The Pahalgam Development Authority has proposed to develop this valley as a beautiful holidaying spot and is thus, carrying out several construction activities in the region.

Mamal Temple: Mamal Shiva Temple in Pahalgam is believed to have come into existence during the development of Himalayas. Nestled between the two Himalayan Ranges of Pir Panjal and Zaskar, Mamal Shiva Temple is said to be a witness to Neolithic age of humans. It was built by King Jayasimha on the right bank of River Lidder and the temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Devotees are welcomed inside the temple by two magnificent pillars. The temple encompasses a Shiva Lingam, with a pure water spring covered by a basin. This pure water spring is natural and makes the view of the temple breathtaking. The spring in the court of the temple is the same spring under which Parvati bathed and had asked Lord Ganesha to safe guard the entrance. Lord Shiva was denied entry by little Ganesha which left him in fury. Shiva in anger decapitated Ganesha and later at the request of Parvati brought him back to life. A visit to Mamal Shiva Temple will fill your heart with spirituality, peace and tranquillity. The beauty of the surrounding Himalayas will surely captivate the heart and soul of a tourist.

Shikargah: Shikargah is a famous wildlife reserve located near the main market area of Pahalgam. Tourists often visit this site with family and friends for enjoying the scenery and indulging in picnics. Ponies are available from the market to reach the reserve; however, travelers can also choose to walk to this picnic spot.

Baisaran: Baisaran, situated 5 km away from Pahalgam, is a lush meadow enveloped with dense vegetation. The meadow is dotted with thickly wooded forests of pine, and provides a view of the beautiful snow-clad mountains that surround it from all sides. Resembling European resorts, this huge and undulating meadow serves as a good campsite. A trip to Pahalgam is incomplete without visiting Baisaran.

ii). Meadowland Region

The region is endowed with green carpet like meadows and pastures, forests, springs and lakes. However this region lacks the tourism infrastructure and is also characterized by inadequate accessibility. The important tourist destinations of this region are Aru (a rolling meadow of velvety green turf, fringed with fir and pines), Chandanwari (Chandan-pleasure giving coolness, Wari- farm) and Sheshnag lake (derived its name from seven peaks that look like the head of Sheshnag, the sacred snake in the Hindu mythology).

Aru: A small village, 11 kms upstream the Lidder River, is a beautiful locality. The route is picturesque with ample campsites. This charming meadow can be reached by walking along a mountain path. The river Lidder disappears at Gur Khumb and reappears after 27 mts. The Aru valley is noted for its scenic meadows. It is popular among the tourists for its peaceful environment and scenic beauty. The village is a base camp for trekkers to the Kolahoi Glacier, the Tarsar-Marsar lakes and the Katrinag valley. It is also a base for the treks to Lidderwat, the Vishansar-Kishansar lakes and Kangan. The Kolahoi is the largest glacier in the Kashmir Valley, and is located near Mt. Kolahoi (5425m), the highest peak in the Valley. A number of hotels, restaurants and huts are available for boarding and lodging in Aru.

There are about 20 lakes, peaks and meadows around the Aru Valley. In the winters, when Aru receives heavy snowfall, skiing and heliskiing are practiced. Other popular tourist activities include fishing of trout in the Lidder River, trekking, hiking, horse riding, sightseeing and photography.

Sheshnag Lake: It is an alpine high altitude oligotrophic lake situated at the track leading to Amarnath cave 23 kilometres from Pahalgam at an elevation of 3590 meters. It has a maximum length of 1.1 kilometres and maximum width of 0.7 kilometres. According to the Hindu mythology Sheshnag means '*the king of snakes*' and the lake was dug by Sheshnag himself. It is believed by the Hindus that Sheshnag stays in this Lake even today. It is one of the most ancient places of pilgrimage for the Hindus, as it lies on the track of Amarnath cave. Sheshnag Lake is home to many a type of fishes among which is the brown trout. It freezes during winter, and is inaccessible during this season due to heavy snowfall. It is surrounded by green lush meadows and mountains covered by snow. Sheshnag Lake is one of the famous tourist destinations in Kashmir Valley. It is mostly fed by melting of snow and streams coming down from mountain tops. It drains out through a stream which joins Lidder River at Pahalgam. It can be accessed from Chandanwari, where ponies can be hired to cover a trek of 7 km upslope to reach the Sheshnag Lake. Amarnath cave is situated 20 kilometres north of this lake. The best time to visit the lake is from the month of June to September.

Chandanwari: Chandanwari, 16 km from Pahalgam, is the starting point of the Amarnath yatra that takes place every year in the months of Sawan (July to August). The road from Pahalgam to Chandanwari is on fairly flat terrain and can be undertaken by car. From Chandanwari onwards the track becomes much steeper, and is accessible on foot or by pony. About 11 km from Chandanwari is the mountain lake of Sheshnag (3,574 m), after which, 13 km away is the last stop, Panchtarni. Located at the site of confluence of 5 streams, this place is the final stoppage of the Amarnath Yatra, an important Hindu pilgrimage. The Amarnath cave is 6 km from there. During the months of June-August (Sawan), an ice stalagmite forms a natural Shivling in the Amarnath cave. Chandanwari is known for its famous snow bridge that allows for a picturesque view.

iii). Upper Adventure Region

The main tourist attractions of this region are glaciers, high altitude lakes, meadows, network of trekking routes and Amarnath cave. This region comprises of Tulain Lake, Panchtarni, Mahagunas pass, Kolahoi glacier, Lidderwat and Amarnath cave. Tourist infrastructure is least developed in this region and needs special attention to attract tourists. The region experiences highest tourist flow in terms of pilgrims to Amarnath cave in summer season and is devoid of any tourist activity in winter because of heavy snowfall, unstable slopes and inaccessibility.

Tulain Lake: A lake and tourist destination, lies at an altitude of 3,353 metres (11,001 ft) above sea level, 16 kilometres from Pahalgam and 11 kilometres from Baisaran. The lake often has chunks of ice floating in it. It is surrounded on three sides by mountains that rise 300 metres (980 ft) above it and that are usually covered with snow. It is located in a meadow dotted with pine forests. The lake lies between the two Himalayan mountain ranges of Pir Panjal and Zaskar.

Panchtarni: Panchtarni is located at a distance of 13 km from the Sheshnag Lake and about 40 km away from Pahalgam. The spot is named so, as it is situated at the confluence of five streams. Panchtarni is the last stoppage of the Amarnath Yatra as a narrow spiralling 6 km path leading to the Amarnath Cave. The site is most popular for camping. Panchtarni is the halting station for Amarnath Yatra pilgrims.

Kolahoi Glacier: Kolahoi Glacier is a valley glacier in the north-western Himalayan Range situated 26 kilometres north from Pahalgam and 16 kilometres south from Sonamarg. Kolahoi glacier lies at an average elevation of 4700 meters. The highest peak named after the glacier is Kolahoi Peak with an elevation of 5425 meters. The origin of the glacier is below the cirques on the north flank of Kolahoi Peak. It is the source of Lidder River and some melt waters become the tributaries of the Sind River. Kolahoi Glacier is among the victims of global warming, and has shrunk in area from 13.57 km² in 1963 to 10.69 km² in 2005 or a loss of 2.88 km² in three decades. In 1974 the glacier was about 5 km long and is known to have extended for at least 35 km during the Pleistocene. According to a report, Kolahoi is a hanging glacier and hollowed inside. It is a matter of great concern for Kashmir Valley. Many expeditions have failed here. Some Local clubs are trying much to summit it in 2014.

Amarnath Cave: Amarnath cave is a Hindu shrine some 42 kms from Pahalgam. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The cave is situated at an altitude of 3,888 m and reached through Pahalgam town. The shrine forms an important part of Hinduism, and is considered to be one of the holiest shrines in Hindu religion. The cave is surrounded by snowy mountains. The cave itself is covered with snow most of the year except for a short period of time in summer when it is open for pilgrims. Thousands of Hindu devotees make an annual pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave on challenging mountainous terrain to see an ice stalagmite formed inside the cave. En-route the cave, various non-profit organizations set up food supply and resting tents called '*pandals*' which are available for free to the pilgrims. Near the shrine, hundreds of tents which are erected by locals can be hired for a nights stay. Helicopter services from base camp to Panchtarni (6 km from the cave) are also available from various private operators. Environmentalists have expressed concern that the number of people participating in the Amarnath Yatra is having a negative impact on the area's ecology and some have

expressed support for government regulated limits on the number of pilgrims permitted to make the trek.

Scope of Adventure tourism in Pahalgam:

Trekking: The sleepy valley of Pahalgam is also the bedrock of adventure for trekkers. The Pahalgam-Kolahoi trek through the Aru village and Pahalgam-Chandanwari trek to Sheshnag Lake are the most popular routes. Treks especially to the Kolahoi glacier at 18,000 feet are not for the weak willed. Tourists can take a horse ride halfway to the Tulian Lake, which at 11,000 feet, lies frozen the year round. The greenish blue ice against the brown Rocky Mountains is a scene worth the arduous trek.

White-water Rafting: The twisty Lidder River poses a different kind of challenge from that of the Rocky Mountains locking the land. Rafting is organized at the upper region of Lidder where water rushes on, frothy and icy. White-water rafting is another unique way to see the Pahalgam valley – all in one go. White water-rafting is fast emerging as a popular sport in Pahalgam and attracting a lot of domestic as well as international tourists. White water rafting in Pahalgam starts in the month of June. White water-rafting is the most attractive adventure sport here and since last year; some private agencies also start operating this commercial activity. Pahalgam used to have only 10-13 boats sailing along the ice-cold white waters of Lidder Nallah (stream), but now their number has touched 40-45 to cater to the needs of tourists interested in this adventure sport. White-water rafting is also a part of Kashmir festival, held for the promotion of tourism in Kashmir.

Mountaineering in Pahalgam: The Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering and Winter Sports (JIM or JIMWS) was established near Pahalgam at Aru in October 1983. However after 1989, due to political disturbances in the valley, mountaineers were reluctant to come to Aru for training. Accordingly, it was decided to shift the Institute temporarily to Batote on the Jammu side of Banihal in August 1990. However, in view of certain adverse reports regarding law & order, regular training courses conducted by the Institute were temporarily suspended from April 1996. The Institute is now based out of Nunwan (famous for where the Pahalgam Amarnath Yatra camp is organized at a couple of kms short of Pahalgam) in Pahalgam and is back to conducting regular courses.

Existing infrastructure and superstructure in Pahalgam

Accommodation: The Jammu And Kashmir Tourism Development Corporation (JKTDC) offers a vast network of accommodation throughout the Pahalgam. These accommodation complexes are strategically located and come in low budget, economy and deluxe ranges. An array of delicious cuisines like Kashmiri Wazwan adds up to the rich flavour of endearment that Pahalgam has to offer. Some of the major hotels in Pahalgam are Paristaan resorts, Dreamland guest house, Hotel Tuliyan, Forest hill resort, Heaven hotel etc. Tourists are also provided with tourist huts with facilities matching a deluxe hotel. For accommodation in Pahalgam hotels, resorts, clubs, cottages, tourist huts and camps play significant role. It has been observed that the tourism industry can be finely established, when the accommodation is properly maintained, upgraded to meet all the categories of the tourists. Pahalgam has a privilege of having neat, comfortable and cheap accommodation facility.

Food: When it comes to food and drinks Pahalgam has a fantastic range of restaurants that offer local Kashmiri cuisine as well as Indian, Chinese and Continental food. All restaurants have some local specialities. Tourist can also be seen in small teashops watching down delicacies with cups of special tea known as ‘Kahwa’ in local language. The cuisines of Kashmiri ‘Wazwan’ are famous world over.

Transport: The rapid progress of transport facilities has been instrumental in accelerating the economic development in Pahalgam. The Govt. of J&K has given high priority to the development of transport facilities especially the road transport. As rail transport is still far away from reaching Pahalgam, it wholly depends on road transport. Transport facilities from deluxe coaches to luxurious cars are available for tourists from Jammu and Srinagar. For air travel, tourists avail the services from the nearest airport Srinagar which is around 90 kms away. During the months of Amarnath Yatra a helicopter service is operated for pilgrims from Pahalgam to Panchtarni. Special discount fares are available to the tourists during these months.

Suggestive measures for the improvement of tourism facilities and services in pahalgam

- Potential entrepreneurs may be identified and encouraged for operating tourist friendly taxis and tourist coaches.
- Accessibility at the bus stands and shopping area may be improved by providing access to major facilities like toilets, drinking water, cafeterias and other public places.
- Enhancement of public transport infrastructure.
- The destination needs to be made tourist friendly through tie-up with tour operators by designing itinerary that includes accommodation, logistics, food and various activities offered.
- Governments need to establish and enforce accessibility policy on various modes of transportation and make it mandatory.
- The transportation industry must take responsibility for the provision of high-quality services equal to or above that of industry norm.
- Governments ensure facilities and services are accessible.
- Tourism providers ensure accessible information at points of services.
- International/ regional standards on accommodations applying universal design so that all facilities and rooms in accommodations are accessible for all.
- All relevant stakeholders are to utilize appropriate technology to improve on whole aspects of tourism.
- All relevant stakeholders collaborate to provide innovative and affordable solutions to promote tourism.
- Specific programmes to adequately train the people involved in tourism operations should be launched. Focus of such exercise should be to sensitize them on problems of tourists.

Conclusion

Today tourism is an important component not only in economic terms but also but also for knowledge and human welfare. Tourism no longer remains confined to few, nowadays it is an activity accessible to a growing number of people and societies. Kashmir valley is described as a paradise on earth and

Pahalgam is known as the crown of Kashmir. Its natural beauty is remarkable and has ample attractions for the tourists reaching here from all over the world. With its clean and pleasant environment, dense forest cover and rare species of flora and fauna the place exhibits excellent potential for all forms of tourism. Pahalgam occupies a unique place in the tourist industry of J&K. It attracts people from different corners of the world not only for its natural beauty but offers spiritual satisfaction to lacs of Hindu devotees who visit Amarnath Cave every year. The climax of the tourist influx remains largely during the summer months and shows negative trend in winters. Adverse weather conditions hinder the inflow of the tourists to the Pahalgam valley during winters.

Pahalgam has a huge tourism potential and it can be harnessed to its fullest by the joint and collective efforts of the Government, civil society and the residents of the area. The state Govt. can promote the destination through electronic and mass media. The decline in the incidents of political violence in the region is one of the pull factors. But the frequent security checks carried out en-route by the security forces are to be minimal to avoid inconvenience to the visitors. Tourism has assumed an overwhelming importance as a component of mountain economies around the world. Pahalgam valley is the leading tourist destination of Kashmir as it receives mass number of tourists out of total inflow towards Kashmir valley. Tourist related activities are concentrated mainly in the Pahalgam bowl which poses a potential threat to the ecology of the site. The identification of tourist potential regions will not only help to explore the type of tourist attraction but will also guide to develop necessary tourist infrastructure on sustainable basis. Not only in Pahalgam, but throughout the world tourism industry is emerging as the largest sector for employment and development. Besides natural gift of scenic beauty the valley of Pahalgam has rich cultural and religious heritage of most of the religions. The Shrines and pilgrimage yatras are classic example of communal harmony. The role of tourism in economic development and employment generation is immense. With the emergence of new avenues there are huge possibilities of growth in this sector. The tourism industry is poised to garner job opportunities not only in urban area but in rural areas of Pahalgam.

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