

## PROSPECTIVE OF ECOTOURISM IN POONCH DISTRICT

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### **Abstract**

Tourism is the largest and a very fast growing industry. However we must not take too lightly the visitor effect on environmental resources which subsequently triggers a plethora of problems leading to the global warming, which is indeed a great threat to the life on this planet. But ecotourism is both economically and environmentally viable activity, which aims at conserving environment on the one hand and providing economic opportunities to the local people on the other. Poonch often called as “mini Kashmir” is a district in the State of Jammu and Kashmir, India. The study is an attempt at analyzing the potential of district Poonch for ecotourism, which eventually would improve the socio economic conditions of the local people by providing them with livelihood opportunities. The study is based on both primary (field work and in-depth discussions with district authorities and local people, in and around tourist spots) and secondary sources of data. It has been found that Poonch district has an enormous potential for ecotourism. Poonch is quite rich in natural, religious, cultural and historical sources essential for ecotourism. Its natural scenery, lingual, cultural and religious multitude with unique historical heritage provides enormous prospects for Ecotourists. Various ecotourism activities and concepts like Rural Tourism, Transhumance activities, Lake Tourism, Trekking etc which are able to be significant to Poonch district have been pointed out. At the end certain suggestions have been made to give momentum to the ecotourism in Poonch.

**Key Words:** Ecotourism, Heritage, environmental resourcees, Rural Tourism, Transhumance activities.

### **Introduction**

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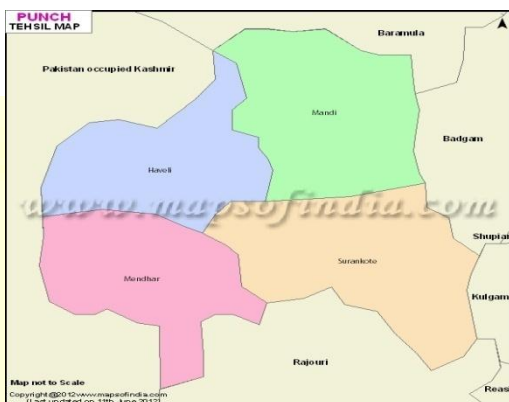
Poonch is the south western district of Jammu and Kashmir. It shares its border with Pakistan Administered Poonch in the west, Kashmir valley in the north, and Rajouri in the south. It stretches between 33°25' to 34°01' north latitudes and between 73°58' to 74°35' east longitudes<sup>1</sup>. Poonch has a population of 4, 76,820 and it is the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous district of Jammu and Kashmir. It constitutes 3.80 percent population of the total population of the State<sup>2</sup>. Number of rural households in the district are 55,602 and that of urban households are 4,246 from a total of 59,848. It covers an area of 2, 84,184 acres. And has 84,140 acres of land under forest.<sup>3</sup> It is a mountainous region with the exception of a very small number of low lying valleys. Its Sky touching mountain peaks covered with shining snow and luxuriant lush green forests, crystal clear streams and pleasing atmosphere in an enjoyable weather present an eye-catching landscape. District Poonch is popularly known as mini Kashmir.

Poonch is culturally quite diverse. People of almost all major religions reside in the district in peace and harmony. Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity are the major religions. They speak different languages like Urdu, Kashmiri, Gojri and Pahari. The only means of connectivity with other parts of the state is road. Poonch city is about 240 Km from Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir State. Generally it takes 7 to 8 hours to reach Poonch by public buses. The Private transport has also been developed and people prefer to use private vehicles like Tata Sumo, Tempos etc. It is connected with Srinagar (Kashmir) via Historical Mughal Road also via Jammu.

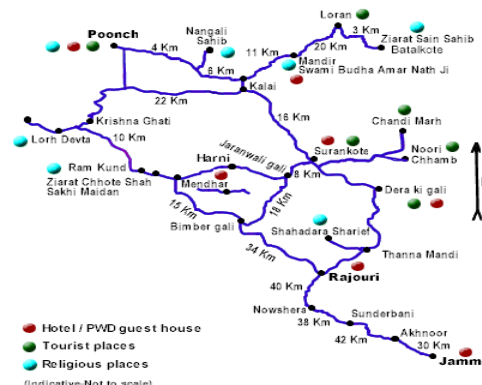


Source: www.probharat.com

### Travel Guide



Source: www.mapsofindia.com



Source: www.poonch.nic.in

### Ecotourism: A conceptual Framework

Tourism is world’s largest industry and is growing very fast. It is an effective instrument for booming economic development in a state like Jammu and Kashmir which is already a tourist hub. However we must not underestimate the visitor effect on environmental resources which subsequently triggers a plethora of problems leading to the global warming, which is a great threat to the life on this planet. But ecotourism is both economically and environmentally viable activity, which aims at conserving environment on the one hand and providing economic opportunities to the local people on the other.

The term ecotourism was coined by Hector Ceballos Lascurian in 1983. The term was initially used to describe the nature based travel with emphasis on education, management and development of sustainable tourism product and activity. World Tourism organisation defines Ecotourism as “the tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with specified objective of studying admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals as well as any existing cultural aspects (both of past and present) found in these areas<sup>4</sup>. Ecotourism is the sustainable development tourism which is developed on the ecotourism resources (such as ecological landscape, ecological environment, ecological culture, ecological

technology, ecological industry, ecological products, etc.) for content, and based on ecological civilization<sup>5</sup> Ecotourism is one strategy for supporting conservation and providing income for communities in and around protected areas. It can contribute to economic development and conservation of protected areas by: a) generating revenues that can be used to sustainably manage protected areas, b) providing local employment and c) inculcating a sense of community ownership<sup>6</sup>.

Thus Ecotourism may be defined as the ecological friendly tour and travelling to the unharmed natural environments, wherein understanding of environment and culture, their conservation and economic activity go hand in hand. It is thus a sustainable form of tourism.

The wealth of natural beauty along with rich heritage and cultural mosaic enjoyed by Poonch is the greatest attraction for the tourists. Poonch is quite rich in terms of both, its natural assets such as its mountains, forests, lakes, rivers, heart touching pleasant weather, the diverse and rare flora and fauna which is unexplored and its cultural, lingual and religious multitude.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study has been carried out to fulfil the following objectives:

- To analyze the potential of District Poonch for Ecotourism for domestic and foreign visitors.
- To explore the so far unexplored ecotourism destinations in district Poonch.
- To apply different concepts and kinds of ecotourism to the study area.
- To present Poonch as an important Tourist Destination of Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Methodology**

The present study has been carried out with the help of data collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include in depth discussions with officers of Tourism Department, Poonch and the local people. Secondary data has been collected through Census of India and the official website of District Poonch. Empirical observations different potential ecotourism destinations constituted a major part of the study.

### **Ecotourism sources in Poonch**

#### **Natural Sources:**

#### **Noori Chhamb**

Noori Chhamb is a waterfall, near Behram Galla in Tehsil Surankote. It is at around a distance of 45kms from Poonch city on the right side of Mughal Road. Jahangir, the Mughal King, had developed so much love and fancy for this water fall that he named it Noori Chhamb after the

name of his adored queen Noor Jahan. The queen used to stay here for leisure and to take a bath while on way to Kashmir. The remnants of the mirror, which was fixed for the queen beside the water fall, on a mountain wall are still there. (pic.1)

### **Nandishool**

Nandishool is another beautiful water fall about 12 kms from the village Loran, in Tehsil Mandi. The water fall is about 150 feet high. (pic.2)

### **Dehra Ki Gali**

Dehra Ki Gali, which is, located at a height of about 6300 feet above mean sea level is an important tourist attraction. It is 45 kms away from Poonch city. Its salubrious weather, lush green forests, and delightful view of mountain peaks along with beautiful nearby valleys are unparalleled.

### **Behramgala**

Behramgala is a small tableland which is surrounded by mountains and forests and a small perennial stream is another tourist attraction. It is situated at a distance of 41kms from Poonch city on Mughal Road. It is located close to the confluence of Parnai & Tatta Pani streams and Noori Chhamb which further adds to its picturesque and pristine beauty.(pic.3)

### **Mandi**

Mandi is a small village in a narrow valley delimited by steep and grassy mountain peaks. It is located near the confluence of two rivulets namely Gagri and Pulsta at a distance of around 20kms from Poonch city. Owing to cool type of weather and nearness to the Poonch city, Mandi is an excellent destination for visitors, in the hot summers. (pic.4)

### **Loran**

Loran, a tiny village, at the foothills of Pir Panjal, is one more place for the sightseer. It is situated at a distance of 35 kms from Poonch city. Loran Nalah (rivulet) which flows through the village makes it more captivating to the eyes. Loran was the capital of Erstwhile Poonch State under Hindu Kings up to 1542 and was known as Loran-Kote. Remnants of the Lohar Kote fort which used to be the Gateway of Kashmir are still present.

### **Surankote**

Surankote is a small town situated on the banks of river Suran. It is an attractive valley enclosed by towering mountain peaks which remain covered with snow during winter. It is generally

called Pahalgam of Poonch. According to Rajatarangini of Kalhan, Surankote was called Sawernik in the past.(Pic.6)

### **Girjan Dhok**

Girjan is a vale of seven stunning and stupendous lakes of geological importance namely Sukh Sar, Neel Sar, Bhag Sar, Kator Sar, Kaaldachni Sar and Nandan Sar. These lakes are situated at an altitude of 12000 feet. Girjan is at a distance of around 70 kms from Poonch city. (Pic.7)

### **Nandan Sar**

Nandan Sar is among the largest lakes of Poonch. It is around one mile long and half a mile wide. (Pic.8) The famous Urdu writer, Krishan Chander after seeing the natural beauty of the Girjan region penned down a story entitled "Girjan ki Ek Sham ( An Evening in Girjan)".

### **Tatakuti peaks**

Tatakuti peak standing at an elevation of 15560 feet is the highest mountain peak of Pir Panjal Range. On a clear day it can be seen even from Lahore. It is still an unexplored peak challenging explorers with crystal clear water, the alpine lakes and the lofty heights.(pic.8)

### **Mughal Road**

The opening, reconstruction and renewal of historic Mughal road have turned out to be a luxury for tourists. Remnants and monuments of Mughal period, Shrines and religious sites, unexplored forests, fine-looking meadows, springs, rivulets, waterfalls transhumant activity and diverse cultures on its way have made it a paradise for ecotourists and adventurers.(pic.9)

### **Pir Ki Gali**

It is situated on the right side of Mughal Road near Pir Panjal pass. Here is the memorial of Sheikh Ahmed Kareem, the famous Saint. People of from all walks of life visit this shrine frequently. (pic.10)

### **Der**

Der is a Dhok (meadow) in village Mahra, in the Tehsil of Surankote at an altitude of around 6000 feet. It is primarily grassland. It is surrounded by mountains from all the sides. Nature lovers has found cricket as a way to enjoy cool and pleasant weather in summer. Cricket tournaments are held in June-July every year. Cricket lovers from adjoining districts visit the region large numbers. (pic.11)

### **Flora and Fauna**

The geographical and climatic conditions, prevailing over the district pave the way for diversity and plenty of wildlife. The district covers an area about 83.914 acres under forests. Chir forests are an important category of vegetation in the state. The rare animals include the markhor, musk deer, brown bear, leopard, ghoral etc. Important birds which are found in different parts of the district comprise the Pheasant, Black Partridge, Chakurs, Snow Cock, kohlas etc. (pic.12)

### **Trekking Sources**

Poonch is an attractive region for trekkers. Due to lack of transportation facilities and modes of communication Poonch has always been a kind of trekking ground for locals and outsiders.

The important trekking routes include:

#### **Poonch to Gulmarg (Kashmir) via Jammia gali**

Poonch – Gaggrian Sawjian - Barshi Nallah - Barnara marg - Jamia marg - Jamia gali (15000 feet.) -Gulmarg (Tangmarg).

#### **Poonch to Nandishool via Loran (Sultan Pathri)**

#### **Poonch to Yusmarg(Kashmir) via Nurpur gali and Khaara gali**

Poonch - Loran - Sultan Pathri - Nurpur gali - Toshamaidan - Kundlan - Dood Ganga Bridge - Yushmarg.

#### **Poonch to Yusmarg(Kashmir) via Choti gali**

Poonch - Behramgala - Chandimarh - Kabar Pathran - Choti gali(14100 feet.) - Kundlan - Yusmarg.

#### **Poonch to Tatakuti via Hill Kaka and Dhara marg**

#### **Poonch to Shopian(Kashmir) via Peer ki gali**

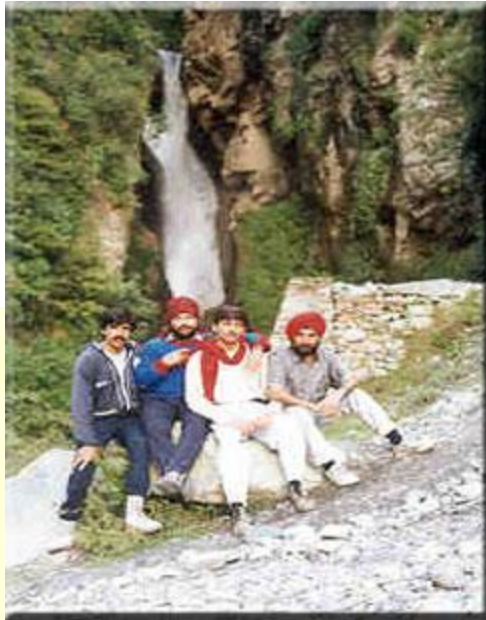
Poonch - Behramgala - Poshiana - Chita Pani - Peer gali (11500 feet.) - Aliabad Sarai - Hierpur - Shupian.

#### **Poonch to Hierpur (Kashmir) via Nandansar lake**

Poonch - Behramgala - Girgen gali - Girgen marg - Panjtari marg - Khuooah - Gumsar - Nandan gali- Glacier - Nandansar lake - six other lakes - Jaddi marg - Aliabad - Hierpur.

#### **Poonch to Gulmarg via Chor Gali**

Poonch - Sawjian - Gali Maidan - Mangiana - Sari -Chor Gali – Gulmarg<sup>8</sup>.



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Behram Galla

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Nandansar

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## Historical Sources

### Poonch Fort

The foundation of Poonch fort was laid down by Raja Abdul Razaq Khan in 1713. The real construction work was started by his distinguished prince Raja Rustam Khan who was a great admirer of architecture. During the Sikh rule (1819-1846) the central block of the building was added which bears the distinct influence of Sikh architectural style. The Fort in its present style and shape owes to the compassion of Raja Moti Singh (1850-1892) who employed an European

architect to design the front block of the Fort. It was during Raja Baldev Singh's rule that the fort was transformed into a secretariat of the kingdom after shifting the Palace to Moti Mahal. The fort speaks of the aesthetic sense of the rulers and adds to the architectural beauty of Poonch<sup>9</sup>. (pic.13)

Apart from Poonch fort Moti Mahal, Bagh Deodi, (pic.13 &14) Sheesh Mahal and numerous other monuments are needed to be utilized for ecotourism.



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### Religious Sources

Poonch is a land of Sufis and Saints. It is a hub of religious visitors belonging to different faiths, even from outside the state. The prominent religious places include:

#### Ziarat Sain Miran Sahib

This Ziarat is located in the village Guntrian near the LOC. The place is regularly visited by followers of different religious beliefs. (pic.16)

**Ziarat Chhote Shah Sahib**

The shrine of Chhote Shah is located at Sakhi Maidan about 5 kms from Mendhar. The remnants of ancient architecture prevalently supposed to be of the Pandvas lie at a distance of few minutes.(pic.17)

**Ziarat Sain Illahi Bakhsh Sahib**

The renowned shrine of Sain Illahi Bakhsh is located in the village Battalkote in Mandi. It is at a distance of 37kms from Poonch city. This shrine place is surrounded by lofty mountain peaks, lush green forests, attractive maize fields and beautiful sinuous streams. Saint, Illahi Bakhsh, had chosen this place keeping in the view its natural beauty. An Urs is organised in his memory every year in the month of May. People from all faiths come to this place in great numbers, even from outside Jammu and Kashmir.(pic.18)

**Ziarat Pir Fazal Shah Sahib**

This Shrine is located at Gundi village in Surankote. It is also a frequently visited shrine.

**Ziarat Pir Rattan Shah**

It is situated on the boundary of Poonch and Rajouri Districts at an altitude of about 6000 feet. It is frequently visited by visitors all the year around.

**Budha Amarnath Temple**

Budha Amarnath temple is situated in Mandi at a distance of 25 kms from Poonch city near the the confluence of Gagri and Pulsta streams. The temple is situated in the midst of snow covered mountain peaks, lush green forests and pastures and crystal clear streams. The original temple was constructed with one stone. There are four doors on each side indicating that the shrine is open to all the four Varnas. There is a natural Shivlinga of white stone (chakmak) inside the temple. There were four holy springs near the temple in the past. At present three springs has been diverted to the southern side of the temple. The pilgrims first take a bath in the spring before entering the temple. On the eve of Raksha Bandhan *MELA SWAMI BUDHA AMARNATH JI FESTIVAL* is celebrated. Three days before the eve, a religious gathering is held at Dashnami Akhara Poonch for performing Havan and Pooja of Chhari Mubarak. The procession of Chhari starts from Akhara. A guard is offered to Chhari Mubarak at the gate of the Akhara. The Mahant Ji is being carried in a palki by the disciples. Thousands of devotees accompany the procession which leads towards Budha Amarnath temple on foot. The chhari is taken to the main shrine in

between the traditional rituals followed by the Aarti of Lord Shiva. Thousands of visitors accompany the procession from all over India. (pic.19)

### **Ramkund Temple**

Ramkund temple is situated in Tehsil Mendhar. It has three springs namely Ram Kund, Sita Kund and Lakshman Kund. Pilgrims take a bath there on first bright half of chaitra (March).

### **Shri Dashnami Akhara Temple**

It is located in southern part of the Poonch city. Saint Jawahar Giri came to this place in the year 1760 and started his meditation. The Saint took his Samadhi in 1787. His Samadhi is still there on the left side of the Samadhi complex. After Swami Jawahar Giri, Swami Shamaya Nand, who was a Sanskrit scholar, sat on this religious seat. After Swami Shamaya Nand, Swami Shankarya Nand Giri followed by Swami Parma Nand Ji and Swami Satya Nand Saraswati had this position. Swami Satya Nand Saraswati decorated this place and sent the message of religious significance of this place throughout India. Presently, Swami Vishavatma Nand Saraswati is on the seat of the temple. Every year Chhari is taken from this place to Budha Amarnath temple.

### **Gurudwara Nangali Sahib**

Gurudwara Nangali Sahib is situated in the midst of picturesque hills on the banks of Drungali Nallah at a distance of about 6kms from Poonch city. (pic.20) It is one of the oldest Shrines of the Sikhs in Northern India. Large number of devotees visits this shrine from all over the Country every year. The gurudwara was established by Thakur Bhai Mela Singh Ji (Fourth successor of Sant Bhai Feru Singh Ji) in the 1803. Maharaja Ranjit Singh visited Gurudwara Nangali Sahib in 1814. He attached an estate with the Gurudwara sahib. He again attached four villages to the Gurudwara in 1823. This Gurudwara has remained a focus of the Sikhism in the state. Round the clock Langar (community kitchen) and rest house facility is provided to the pilgrims without considering their religion, caste and creed etc. On every Sundays a large congregation is held. A huge function is held in the Gurudwara Sahib on the eve of Baisakhi every year<sup>10</sup>.

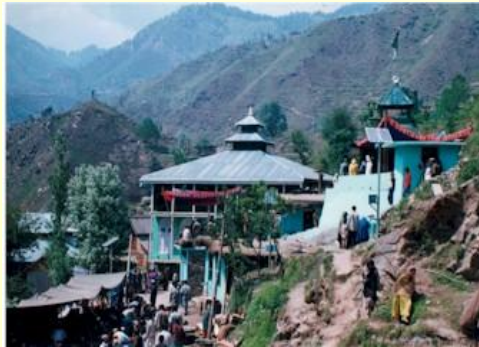
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### Rural tourism/ Village Tourism

Any form of tourism that showcases rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, there by benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourist and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience is termed rural tourism<sup>11</sup>.

The villages of Poonch have a huge potential for rural tourism. This potential if make use of can be a boon for local people. Villages can be used for halts. Interaction with local people is not new to the ecotourism. To know different places, people and their products is not new to those

who travel to explore and learn. The religious, cultural and lingual multitude of villages in Poonch is of immense importance for the ecotourists. As ecotourism is the travelling to observe and admire not only the nature, but to be acquainted with the diversity of flora and fauna, with the identification of the different traditions and cultures, that are unique to different people, and places.

### Transhumance

Paharis, Gujjars and Bakarwals are the prominent ethnic groups of the state. They are essentially animal (cattle, goat, and sheep) keeper. Pahari farmers migrate to Dhoks (meadows) where they find green pastures and fodder for animals in the summers. They make Taras or Kothas (mud houses with thatched roofs) and Bandis (Taras for animals). These Dhoks are located at higher reaches. In winter they return back to their permanent settlements. These people essentially speak Pahari. (pic.21&22)

Like Paharis Gujjars and Bakarwals have become sedentary to a large extent. But a large population among them is still transhumant. They migrate seasonally along with their cattle, sheeps and goats in search of fodder. In summer they also migrate to Dhoks. They live in tent and settle temporarily wherever, they find fodder. Some of them have also constructed Taras and Bandis in these Dhoks. These ethnic groups are the best example of symbiotic relationship of man and environment. Such Dhoks are found in all the four tehsils of Poonch. They me serve as an important tourist destination.



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### Conclusion

Owing to its pristine natural beauty, multitude and uniqueness of its diverse cultures and rich heritage Poonch has a huge potential for ecotourism. However, this potential cannot be cultivated because of the lack of necessary infrastructure and advertisement. The study displays the enormous ecotourism potential of Poonch district which exists but is unknown and has still not gained the attention of policy makers. The matchless magnificence, natural beauty, unique and rich cultural and religious heritage of Poonch must be conserved for ecotourism. In order to develop ecotourism industry in Poonch, the very first step is its advertisement and serious concern of State Govt towards necessary and vital infrastructural facilities. District authorities must consult and ask for cooperation from State and other national ecotourism organisations regarding the issue. Awareness among the masses is of prime importance. Thus local authorities should generate awareness among local people, by educating them about the economic and environmental merits of ecotourism, especially villagers. Local people should be given technical assistance for selling their own products to the tourists. In this way ecotourism apart from providing the permanence of the natural and cultural assets, may also provide a side income for the local people.

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