

# Opportunities and Challenges of Tourism Sector in Sikkim

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**Abstract:** *Sikkim is a paradise blessed with green lush topography, a wide variety of flora and fauna, emerald mountain lakes, flowering and alpine meadows to the picturesque tea garden. The main objective of this paper is to identify its opportunities relating to different tourism related activities. On the other hand, the state is not free from challenges. The paper has also tried to highlight those challenges based on the primary interaction based on the interaction with the various stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** Sikkim, Tourism, Opportunities, Challenges

## 1. Introduction

Sikkim is a paradise blessed with green lush topography, a wide variety of flora and fauna, emerald mountain lakes, flowering and alpine meadows to the picturesque tea garden. It is located in the north - eastern part of the country, in the eastern Himalayas. It is one of the smallest states in India bordered by the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north and north - east, by Bhutan to the south - east, by the Indian state of West Bengal to the south and by Nepal to the west. Sikkim has 4 districts – East Sikkim, West Sikkim, North Sikkim and South Sikkim. The district capitals are Gangtok, Gyalshing, Mangan and Namchi respectively. Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo, Magar, Rai, Gurung, Sherpa, Tamang, Newari and Sunuwar (Mukhia) are the commonly spoken languages. The capital of the state is Gangtok, in the south - eastern part of the state.

Mt. Khangchendzonga (8, 586), the third highest mountain in the world can be considered as the jewel in the crown. The Khangchendzonga National Park is the India's first Mixed Heritage Site. By travelling within Sikkim one can traverse from tropical to temperate to alpine and from almost sea level to a soaring 18000 ft. While Mt Khangchendzonga at about 28, 000 ft. is the highest point in Sikkim, there are places like Melli at only 1100 ft. above sea level and these varied altitudes in Sikkim makes the state one of the major bio - diversity hotspots in the world. Moreover, the state certified as the only fully organic state in the world, which makes the state unique. The state is a fine balance of traditional values and modernity. It is modern in its outlook but it is firmly rooted in its intrinsic values. All these make the state truly a multi - dimensional holiday destination. With tourism as the thrust sector, it has become an excellent platform for job - creation especially for youth of Sikkim.

## 2. Objective

The general as well as specific objective of the paper is to identify the opportunities and challenges of tourism sector in Sikkim. Sikkim is a paradise blessed with green lush topography, a wide variety of flora and fauna, emerald mountain lakes, flowering and alpine meadows to the picturesque tea garden. The main objective is to identify its opportunities relating to different activities. On the other hand, the state is not free from challenges. The paper will try to highlight those challenges also.

## 3. Methodology

The paper is based on both the primary and secondary data. The secondary data is collected from the existing literature, program documents, web pages, brochures, and maps. Primary data have been gathered and validated through personal communication with different stakeholders like officials of Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Govt. of Sikkim, service providers like owners of hotels, homestays and tour agencies, tourist guides, drivers etc. This paper is a qualitative descriptive analysis of the tourism sector.

## 4. Discussion

Tourist inflows to Sikkim were trivial even after Sikkim got merged with India as large areas remained restricted to tourists due to security reasons. However, in the recent times, growth of tourism increased greatly as more areas came under relaxation of permit regime and Sikkim has become one of the popular tourist destinations. Tourism industry in Sikkim experienced a big boost after 2010 and evolving as an important economic tool of the state.

### Opportunities

The state offers a natural luxury that everybody looking for. Sikkim is also synonymous with its peace -loving and incredibly hospitable people. The state is a fine balance of traditional values and modernity. It is modern in its outlook but it is firmly rooted in its intrinsic values. All these make the state truly a multi - dimensional holiday destination. This section is divided into two broad groups viz. Various Tourism Activities of the state and Favourable condition of state & its policies. As per the discussion with the Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Govt. of Sikkim and reference from secondary study, the tourism activities of the state are Pilgrimage Tourism and Buddhist Circuit, Adventure Tourism, Bird Watching, Butterfly Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Rural Tourism, Mice Tourism and Eco Tourism. This is discussed below.

### 1) Various Tourism Activities of the state Pilgrimage Tourism and Buddhist Circuit

The Himalayan peaks are considered sacred in Sikkim, and even today, mountaineers stop 10 metres ahead of the peaks as a symbol of their respect towards the deity. Many of its peaks, lakes, caves, hot springs etc. are considered as holy.

Mt. Khangchendzonga is worshipped as the protector of the state, which is considered as abode of their guardian deity Dzo - nga. Some of the places of Sikkim that motivates tourists for the achievement of religious attitude and practices are Siddheswara Dham/Chaar Dham; Krateswar Mahadev Temple, Legship; Khechuperi Lake, Sri Satya Sai Sarva Dharma Kendra; Statue of Guru Padmasambhava; Tathagata Tsal (Buddha Park); Old Rumtek Monastery; Rumtek Dharma Chakra Centre; Pemayangtse Monastery, Enchey Monastery, Rinchenpong, Lachen Monastery, Lingdum Zurmang Monastery; Dubdi Monastery; Tashiding Monastery; Phensang Monastery; Phodong Monastery, Bon Monastery; Tholung Monastery; Chenrezing Shingkhamb Riwo Potola etc. Sikkim has four Holy Caves viz. 'Sharchoy Beyphug', 'Kharido Sangphug', 'Nub DechenPhug', 'Jhang Lhari' and these caves have become the most important pilgrim destination of the Buddhist followers and for the devotees of Bhutan and other parts of the World.

### Bird Watching

Sikkim is an ideal bird watching destination. It has more than 550 species of birds, some of which have been declared endangered. Sikkim has an exceptional bio - diverse landscape and due to this, it is the home for 22 restricted range bird species, including at least 19 species that are endemic to the region and bird species that are not found anywhere in the world. Though the area of the state is very small, it has a bird list that is almost as diverse as that of Bhutan or Nepal. Some of the key birdwatching sites are Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary in South Sikkim, Khecheoperi Lake in West Sikkim, Rumtek Gompa and Fambong Lho Wildlife Sanctuary, Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary and Tsomgo/Changu Lake in East Sikkim, Yumthang, Lachung/Lachen, Chungthang and Shingba Rhododendron Sactuary in North Sikkim.

The Maenam wildlife sanctuary in South Sikkim is famous for Satyr Tragopan (Tragopan Satyra) which is one of the rare species of Pheasants and Fire - tailed Myzornis. Brown wood owl is found here. Some common birds are the Great Himalayan Barbet, Grey Treepie, Green Magpie, Wedge - tailed Green Pigeon, Black Bulbul and many more.

West Sikkim is favourite area for Birding where a number of species like Rusty Cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Scaly Laughingthrush, Red Faced Liorchichla, Fire tailed Myzornis, Scarlet Finch, Cutia, Black - headed Shrike Babbler, Scaly - breasted Wren Babbler, Spotted Wren Babbler and many more. At Khecheoperi Lake, people can see the star bird Black tailed Crake. Other birds in the district the magnificent Spotted Laughingthrush, few species of Parrotbills, Small Beautiful Fire - capped Tit, Species of Shortwings like White - Browed and Lesser Shortwings, Kalij Pheasants and Satyr Tragopan etc.

Some of the birds found in East Sikkim are Rufous - capped Babbler, Red headed Laughingthrush, Brownish - flanked Bush warbler, Slaty - bellied Tesia, Rufous - Throated Wren Babbler, Indian Blue Robin, Grey sided Laughingthrush Rusty - fronted Barwing, Rusty - cheeked Scimitar Babbler, Blue - fronted Robin, Grey - bellied Tesia, Chestnut - Headed Tesia and many more.

North Sikkim is one of the most beautiful areas for Bird watching. Some of species like Snow Pigeon, Blood Pheasants, Himalayan Monal, White - throated Dipper, Spot - winged Grosbeak, White - winged Grosbeak and many more can be seen in this area. There has also been a record of Tibetan Snow Cock in Gurudogmar Lake.

### Adventure Tourism

There are 28 mountain peaks, 80+ glaciers, 227 high - altitude lakes, five major hot springs, 100+ rivers and streams in the state and its rich biodiversity make it a sheer delight for nature lovers and heaven for the adventures like mountaineering, trekking, yak safaris, mountain biking, paragliding, zip line, rope course, traversing, Camping, hiking through its gorgeous villages etc. All these make the state unique as these thrill seekers get an opportunity to experience the rush in a natural environment. People can enjoy a chopper ride and enjoy aerial views of its breath - taking landscape. Therefore, the state has emerged as a hub for people who want to take up courses in mountaineering, trekking, eco - tourism and other adventure activities

### Butterfly Tourism

In Sikkim there is a rich diversity of butterflies. It is found that half of the 1400 butterfly species<sup>1</sup> recorded in India are found in Sikkim including the magnificent, but endangered Kaiser - i - Hind, the Yellow Gorgon and the Bhutan Glory. These can be found in the four sanctuaries in Sikkim and at the Khangchendzonga National Park. The best season to watch butterflies starts from April till September in almost all tourist destinations in Sikkim.

### Heritage Tourism

Sikkim is known for its diverse and rich heritage demonstrated in its old monasteries, culture and traditions. This lead Sikkim towards the cultural heritage of the location and historic places, heritage historical tourism which include cultural, historic and natural resources. The state has beautiful monasteries painted in golden and red colour and preserved in them is the opulent history of Sikkim and is quite vibrant and interesting to experience. Most famous historical places of Sikkim include Dubdi Monastery, Rabdentse ruins, Pemayangtse Monastery, Rumtek Monastery, Phodang Monastery etc.

### Rural Tourism

Rural tourism offers the visitors a glimpse of rural Sikkim, the unique village culture and heritage. Rural homestays are a big attraction for foreign tourists as well as the nature - loving Indian tourist as it is a great way to explore local culture, local cuisine, cultural activities etc. This is a break from hustle of urban life which bring peace and solitude by enjoying trekking trails, bird and nature walks and camping sites being developed around these homestays. Lonely Planet: the sustainable community - based tourism model has recognized Sikkim as the first Indian state to frame an eco - tourism policy with the help of Japanese and American experts in the year 2014. It started popularising village tourism a few years ago and aggressively developed tourist

<sup>1</sup> Sikkim Tourist & Traveler Handbook

destinations, circuits and a bunch of activities to attract tourists<sup>2</sup>.

The prominent village tourism destinations are Dzuluk, Gnathang, Tumin, central Pendam Gadi Budang, Yaakten, Rey Mindu, Luing –Ranka, Phadamchen, Rolep in East Sikkim, Lingee Payong, Maniram, Kewzing, Chalamthang, Rong, Jawbari, Assangthang, Pakzer, Sadam, Sumbuk, Kitam, Perbing, Namthang in South Sikkim; Hee - Bermik, Drarap, yuksom, Pelling, uttarey, Naku Chumbong in West Sikkim and Dzongu, Tingchim, Kabi, Lachen in North Sikkim.

### Eco Tourism

Eco tourism has become a significant part of Sikkim tourism. The region is home to over 4500 species of flowering plants including 527 orchids, 38 Rhododendrons and 58 Primulas and also habitation for 690 butterflies, 16 amphibians, 574 birds and around 154 mammals. This uniqueness helps the region to attract a large number of tourists from across the world. Lachen, Lachung, Dzongu are the prominent areas for ecotourism.

### Mice Tourism

Sikkim due to its natural beauty and hospitality of the locals, a very attractive place for MICE tourism. Mice stands for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions. These are closely related in the sense that they all involve people coming together at one place, for a common purpose and for a short period of time. This is a part of business tourism. These are particularly the tourists travelling for business trip and whose main mission of undertaking business trip is attending meetings, conferences, exhibitions etc.

### Community based tourism and Cluster Based Tourism:

Community based tourism and Cluster Based Tourism have been introduced in some areas in the state of Sikkim as the state is home to many communities. The growth of community tourism perspectives is based on a growing awareness of the need for more resident responsive tourism, which is participatory in nature by the grass - roots members of a destination society. The aim is to involve the local residents in the running and management of small tourism projects, helping to alleviate poverty and provide an alternative income source for the community member. Their different cultures and traditions have been shown to the tourists which will definitely attract the tourists.

### 2) Favourable condition of state & its policies

Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation (STDC) was established in 1998 as a marketing unit of the Tourism Department for management of the tourism assists and prime properties. This corporation plays an important role for all tourism - related activities and events. STDC also operates Sikkim Helicopter Service from Gangtok to Bagdogra Airport.

For the holistic development of the sector, the state has developed the infrastructure like Wayside amenities, cafeteria, guest house, resting, plaza, parking yard etc.

through financial assistance sought from the Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India. It provides not only employment opportunities to local educated unemployed youths but also generates revenue for the govt. Till October 2019, 241 assets have been recorded.

The Pakyong Airport which was inaugurated by Honourable Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2018, is an important intervention for establishing air connectivity to the state and ensure direct accessibility. It is the first ever Greenfield airport in Northeast India.

G. B. Pant 'National Institute of Himalayan Environment and Sustainable Development, an Autonomous Institute of Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Govt. of India has initiated research activities for promoting ecotourism in Sikkim Himalayan region.

Indian Himalayan Centre of Adventure and Eco - Tourism (IHCAE) is situated on a hilltop of Chemchey village. It provides high standard eco - tourism and adventure related training courses and also gives emphasis on instilling the concept of adventure tourism without causing any environment degradation. It is in the process making itself one of the best training institutes for adventure sports in the country. The courses and activities are adventure course, on the job training, adventure travel escort training, snow skiing course, sports climbing course, mountain biking course, basic mountaineering course, advance mountaineering course, P1 Paragliding course, Meditation camp - OSHO and SAATHI Camp.

As the state is a rich diversity of butterflies, the study of butterflies has been included in the textbooks for government schools across Sikkim which is an encouragement for new generation. Event like the first 'Sikkim Butterfly Meet 2015' at Yuksam, ' Dzongu Butterfly Meet 2016' and books like the flying pearls of Sikkim Himalaya and the Butterflies of Dzongu by young Sikkimese writers have made a huge contribution. Distribution of 500 butterfly charts in government schools across Sikkim has encouraged many youths in documenting butterflies. Moreover, Sikkim Ornithological Society has a section for organising butterfly tours with local experts.

As per data provided by the Department of tourism, Sikkim, there are 431 hotels, 936 homestays and 1450 registered travel agents in Sikkim. The homestay owners and those who are interested to open homestay are being trained by the Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Sikkim. The areas where training is being done are Improvement of interior décor; Enhancing ambience of approach pathways and home stay exteriors; showcasing bio - diversity in homesteads/farm houses; providing experiences of agro farming, organic farming, vertical farming, hydroponic cultivation; Arts, crafts, artefacts, souvenirs with historical, cultural or ethnic designs, preparation of ethnic food etc. As per the data provided by State Institute of Capacity Building, 1946 number of candidates have been enrolled for training in Tourism and Hospitality sector. Out of 1946, 1493 number of candidates have been passed and 949 are placed within or outside Sikkim whereas, 296 are self - employed. Under PMKVY 2.0, though 900 number of candidates were

<sup>2</sup> <https://photogallery.indiatimes.com/news/events/lonely-planets-top-destinations-for-2014/articleshow/25451654.cms>

targeted, 676 have been enrolled, out of which 224 number of candidates have been placed. Under DDU - GKY, 212 number of candidates were targeted out of which 161 number of candidates have been trained in last two years. For Adventure Tourism also, basic training was conducted by the department for 15 days. Recently from 4<sup>th</sup> April to 8<sup>th</sup> April 2021, Homestay Association of Sikkim has organised training on marketing, branding, online agency handling, basic of accounting, financing, loans and schemes in Sherpa Bhawan, Okhrey, West Sikkim which was supported by Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Sikkim. Training was conducted from 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> January 2021 by travel Agents Association of Sikkim at TAAS Office to undergo 'Capacity Building Training for Tourism Stake holders of Sikkim'. That was funded by NEC under the Ministry of DoNER for local eligible candidates in the topic like Post Covid - 19 SOP training for Homestay, Guest House & Lodges, Training on Marketing & Promotion, Course on Luxury Hotel Management, Culinary Training on Local Food, Butterfly Guide Training, Training in Souvenir Product, Trekking Guide Training, Travel Agencies Training, Training on Botanical Guide.

### 3) Challenges of the Sector

Mountain peaks, glaciers, high - altitude lakes, hot springs, rivers and streams in the state, and its rich biodiversity make the state, a sheer delight for nature lovers and haven for the adventures. As a result of which the scope for adventure tourism is very high. However, due to some problems, the state has not been able to grow as compared to other hilly states. Shortage of rescue team is some of such problems. One of the officials of Tourism department mentioned that there is a very scope for Paragliding. Presently, Instructors are there, however there is shortage of landing ground for paragliders. This leads to restrict the number of tourists who can avail the service in spite of its high demand. Another problem is Adventure tourism training is expensive as equipment cost is high and it is risky as well hence not many are interested to take up this as profession.

Internet and mobile phone connectivity is an integral part of our lives nowadays. One cannot imagine their life without a mobile phone or the Internet and not being connected with our loved ones even living far away from home. Lack of proper telecommunication facilities is a big hurdle in some areas of the State. Due to this, both tourists and local people are facing problem, there is hardly any facilities for quick transfer of information and evacuation in the unfortunate times of a mishap in some areas. This Internet and mobile phone connectivity issue create problems for the owners of hotels and homestays also as they cannot take online booking which is an integral part in tourism industry now days.

There is a high demand in the state for Bird watching, butterfly watching and flower watching by the domestic as well as international tourists but very less trained professional people are there in this sector.

Though Sikkim is a paradise blessed with green lush topography, a wide variety of flora and fauna, the infrastructure of the state is not up to the mark. There are some areas which are great destination for the thrill - seeking

activities for tourists but due to poor infrastructure, the number of tourists are quite less. For example, in the high altitude areas, JCBs are required to clear the snow. But due to less number of JCBs, on time snow cannot be cleared and it creates problem for the tourists.

## 5. Strategies for the growth of the Sector

### 1) Dissemination of technology information:

Keeping in view the expected boom, the tourism industry needs to focus on developing an efficient infrastructure and increase the intake of skilled personnel. Technological knowhow is very important in this regard. Training should be provided on portal related matter to entrepreneurs, officials and staff of concerned department as most of them are not technically skilled. Training should also be provided regarding knowledge of Computer reservation systems, Air fares and ticketing skills, Language skills, selling skills, experience of handling money & foreign currencies, Customer service, Travel agency management and travel & tourism geography knowledge.

### 2) Awareness and capacity building workshops:

Anyone working in the travel and tourism industry needs to ideally be armed with strong knowledge in history, geography, art and architecture of the state is preferred. Moreover, knowledge on global culture and all aspects of travel business will be added advantage. Employees must be completely aware and up - to - date on all the rules and regulations concerning ticket booking or reservation, passports, visas, cargo and even fines where applicable, so that they can assist in getting paperwork and documentation done. So awareness and capacity building workshops can be conducted for providing knowledge to the stakeholders like entrepreneur, Tourist guide, Drivers etc.

### 3) User - friendly registration process:

The process of registration of tour travel agencies, hotels, restaurants and homestays should be simple for the entrepreneurs. This will encourage more people. Moreover, for the existing stakeholders also, awareness on the process of selection/Renewal of hotels, restaurants, homestays should be provided.

4) **Exposure visit** and see and learn approach should be inculcated for expansion of tourism industry. Exposure visits to successful tourism destination will strengthen understanding and facilitate replication of ideas. It also helps to learn from the experience of others outside the state by direct interaction with the different stakeholders who have similar experience.

### 5) Special courses

As Sikkim has very high potential for activities like Birdwatching, paragliding, mountain hike and biking, butterfly and flower watching, special courses can be introduced in the state on these subjects. This will not only help the youths to have a deeper understanding after studying these activities, but also encourage the youths to take up these as profession for the livelihood.

6) **Cluster approach tourism** should be taken up. One of the approaches to development of the tourism industry, based on market rules and principles are creation and development of tourism clusters. This is because the

tourist satisfaction depends not only on attractiveness of the site, but also on quality and operational efficiency of hotels, restaurants, shopping centres, and transport infrastructure.

- 7) **Local youth in the rescue team:** There is a lack of rescue team in the remote areas of Sikkim. Moreover, it takes time to reach out those places in the time of emergency as some places are far away from the district headquarter. However, if the local youths of these locality are trained, this generates not only employment for the local youth but also fastens the rescue operation.
- 8) **Requirement of Soft Skill:** Employees in this industry need to be skilled, confident, well - groomed, should be able to handle people very well, and possess good interpersonal skills. So soft skill training is also required those who are in this industry.
- 9) **Special protection for Agro system:** The agroecosystems need special protection in order to protect the wild biodiversity as there is no scope of extension of protected areas in lower elevation. Moreover, a synergy between agriculture, horticulture, forest and rural management department along with all stakeholders including farmers is required. Farmers should be encouraged and incentivised to maintain the diversity of the farmlands. Finally, more than monoculture systems, the focus should be on growing a variety of crops in a traditionally way and mixed crop farms to better conserve biodiversity. This will help the sector for its sustainability.

are becoming lost resulting in cultural dilution. The commercialization of local festivals offered to the foreign tourists and excursionists can be seen more fruitful. Accessibilities and identification of tourist circuit along with standard food items and well accommodation facilities need to be developed in the state for the development of tourism sector in the state.

## 6. Conclusions

The hospitable nature of the locals; the magnificent art & craft making skills particularly the amazing weavers among the womenfolk; the incredible cane & the bamboo work of artisans; the mesmerizing folk songs & dances; the blended delicacies of India, Nepal & Bhutan, just to name a few like Gundruk, thupka, churpi, momos, variety of exotic pickle from chilies & bamboo shoot, etc and most importantly the culture of being together despite of the varied tribes & ethnic groups have made the state unique. This also makes the state favourable for its tourism.

The locals of the state are conscious about the changes and the developments that tourism can bring in for them and it is noticed that the locals are willingly participate in the process of community development through tourism. Active participation of the locals is seen at all levels and in all parts of the state in the process. But it is observed that they still have laid back attitude to life and are not yet ready to take the full advantage of the income that can be generated through tourism related industries. Yet some changes have definitely taken place. The locals are no longer shy or reserved persons that they used to be and are quite familiar with the modern ways of life.

The tourism industry's viability is also based on its natural environment. The environment encompasses air, land, and water. The foreign tourists and excursionists' primary interest in Sikkim is to study its glorious culture and fascinating nature. So, the local government must be aware of developing tourist friendly infrastructures and amenities. The unique form of musical expression and cultural vibes