

Action on Loose FASTag

FASTag, introduced by the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), has brought a digital transformation in toll collection across the country. Using RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technology, FASTags enable automatic toll deductions directly from a prepaid or linked bank account as the vehicle passes through a toll plaza. The aim was to reduce traffic congestion, enhance transparency, and promote cashless transactions. However, the rising misuse of FASTags in the form of 'loose FASTag' has become a growing concern.

A 'loose FASTag' refers to a tag that is not permanently affixed to the vehicle's windshield, as required. Instead, it is kept unattached or loosely placed inside the vehicle, enabling it to be misused. In many cases, a single FASTag is shared among multiple vehicles, either by passing it around physically or using it only when passing toll plazas. This undermines the core idea of linking each FASTag uniquely to a vehicle's registration, enabling toll fraud and identity concealment.

Such misuse has serious consequences. For one, it results in revenue loss to NHAI and toll operators, which can hamper road maintenance and infrastructure development. Secondly, it creates loopholes in law enforcement. In cases involving stolen vehicles or criminal activity, tracing a vehicle becomes challenging if the FASTag data does not match the actual vehicle used. It also compromises the integrity of traffic and transport data used for planning and audits.

The use of loose FASTags is a clear violation of government regulations. According to NHAI guidelines, a FASTag must be permanently affixed to a vehicle's windshield and linked to its registration number. Any deviation may lead to deactivation of the tag, imposition of fines, or even legal action in cases of deliberate fraud. The growing trend of non-compliance, if unchecked, can erode public trust in the FASTag system and discourage digital adoption.

To address this issue, authorities are introducing a range of technological and administrative measures. ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) cameras are being deployed at toll plazas to match number plates with FASTag accounts in real-time. GPS tracking in commercial vehicles is being considered to monitor tag usage and detect inconsistencies. Additionally, tamper-proof FASTags that cannot be removed without deactivation are also being explored to prevent their misuse.

Public awareness plays a crucial role in curbing this malpractice. Many users, especially in rural and commercial segments, may not be fully aware of the rules surrounding FASTag usage. Awareness campaigns by NHAI and traffic authorities can help educate users about the importance of proper usage, legal implications, and the collective benefits of a streamlined toll system.

Shakarmarg Darhal: A Potential Global Tourism Magnet

■ M. AIJAZ MALIK

In the heart of the majestic Pir Panjal Range, nestled in the tranquil and ecologically rich belt of Rajouri district in Jammu and Kashmir, lies an unexplored paradise - Shakarmarg Darhal. This breathtaking destination remains one of the most captivating yet underdeveloped gems of the entire Jammu region. For trekkers, nature enthusiasts, adventurers, researchers, and spiritual seekers alike, Shakarmarg is not just a destination - it is an unforgettable experience where pristine nature, cultural heritage, and ecological diversity converge in spectacular harmony. With its numerous lakes, high-altitude meadows, cascading waterfalls, rare flora and fauna, and towering snow-capped peaks, Shakarmarg Darhal holds enormous untapped potential to become one of India's most iconic eco-tourism and adventure tourism hubs.

For far too long, this region has been overlooked despite its immense natural bounty and strategic relevance. The growing global demand for eco-tourism, trekking, offbeat travel, and wellness-based tourism is at an all-time high. It is a golden opportunity for the Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor of Jammu & Kashmir, the UT Tourism Department, the Union Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways to recognize and act upon the immense socio-economic and cultural potential that lies hidden within the meadows of Shakarmarg.

What makes Shakarmarg truly special is its unmatched biodiversity and natural charm. This region boasts a cluster of high-altitude alpine lakes, including yet-undocumented glacial lakes that rival those in Kashmir Valley and Ladakh. These lakes, tucked within the folds of Pir Panjal, reflect the sky like mirrors and offer a surreal trekking experience. The lush green meadows that stretch over vast acres are carpeted with vibrant seasonal wildflowers, aromatic herbs, and medicinal plants, creating a natural tapestry of colors and scents that few places in India can rival.

Moreover, Shakarmarg is home to a diverse range of bird species, many of which are rare and endemic to the Himalayas. From the melodic Himalayan Monal to migratory birds crossing from Central Asia, this region offers tremendous potential for birdwatchers and



ornithologists. Botanists and environmentalists will also find the unique flora in this region scientifically and economically important. Beyond its natural assets, the peaks surrounding Shakarmarg offer world-class opportunities for mountaineering, rock climbing, camping, and paragliding - making it a hotspot for adventure tourism.

Equally important is the socio-cultural and historical fabric of Darhal and the surrounding villages. The people here are warm, hospitable, and deeply connected with their land and traditions. Promoting tourism in this region would not only boost the local economy but also empower tribal and rural communities through homestay programs, eco-tourism jobs, handicraft markets, and local entrepreneurship. It would help preserve indigenous knowledge systems and traditional ecological practices passed down through generations. Additionally, the region has spiritual significance, and many locations in the higher reaches are revered by the local population, offering potential for spiritual and wellness-based tourism.

Despite this immense promise, Shakarmarg suffers from severe infrastructural neglect. The lack of a proper motorable road, insufficient marketing, lack of base camps, trekking infrastructure, digital con-

nectivity, tourist rest houses, and security arrangements keep this paradise hidden. The current road connecting Rajouri to Darhal and beyond towards Shakarmarg remains single-laned, patchy, and underdeveloped. Tourists, researchers, and even locals face great difficulty in accessing this region. It is imperative that the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways prepares a Detailed Project Report (DPR) on an urgent basis for the upgradation and double-laning of the Rajouri-Darhal-Shakarmarg Road, including blacktopping, safety measures, drainage systems, and scenic viewpoint stops.

A world-class road, once constructed, will open up the entire upper Pir Panjal belt to tourism, trade, and development. This will not only serve Shakarmarg but also facilitate connectivity to nearby villages, border tourism circuits, and winter sports zones. The improved infrastructure will attract national and international tourists, generate employment, and enhance the region's inclusion in the UT's overall tourism policy. The introduction of proper signboards, helpads, mountain rescue teams, eco-camps, and solar-based eco-lodges will ensure both safety and sustainability.

I also request the Union Ministry of Tourism to include Shakarmarg in its list of

priority destinations under schemes such as PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) Parvat Mala and Swadesh Darshan, focused on promoting eco and cultural tourism circuits. A focused marketing campaign under "Incredible India" and "Visit Jammu" should be launched, including digital videos, short documentaries, Instagram reels, and adventure travel blogs highlighting Shakarmarg's natural allure.

Furthermore, I urge the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to organize an annual Shakarmarg Adventure Festival, featuring trekking expeditions, bird-watching tours, village fairs, cultural performances, and photography contests to bring this region into the national spotlight. Collaborations with private travel firms, academic researchers, NGOs, and international conservation groups will bring in further visibility and accountability.

I also appeal to the LG Administration and UT Tourism Department to establish a Shakarmarg Tourism Development Authority (STDA), with a focused mandate to plan, promote, and manage tourism in the area through a sustainable lens. This authority can ensure long-term planning, waste management, land use regulation, eco-lodge certification, and the preservation of fragile ecosystems. With responsible and inclusive planning, Shakarmarg can become a model for how untouched Himalayan regions can be opened for tourism without compromising their environmental and cultural sanctity.

Hon'ble LG Sir and Respected Ministers, this is not just a call for development-it is a plea to recognize a forgotten paradise. The economic upliftment, national integration, ecological conservation, and strategic value of Shakarmarg Darhal are immense. With just the right infrastructural push and administrative attention, this jewel of Pir Panjal can transform into a global tourism destination, bringing prosperity not only to Rajouri district but also to the entire Jammu region.

I hope and trust that your esteemed offices will take this passionate appeal with utmost seriousness and initiate immediate steps toward making Shakarmarg Darhal - The Valley of Seven Lakes - a reality on the world tourism map.

Darhal Malkan: The Valley of Waterfalls

■ SHAFEEQ AARISH

Darhal Malkan, fondly known as Darhal Valley, is a serene retreat nestled in the Peer Panjal region, approximately 19 km north of Rajouri town and 160 km from Jammu in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Home to nearly 40,000-45,000 residents, this bowl-shaped valley, situated at an elevation of 915 meters (3,001 feet), is a haven for adventure tourism. It beckons those seeking to reconnect with nature and escape the relentless pace of modern life, filled with physical and psychological challenges. Encircled by gently sloping mountains adorned with lush coniferous forests, the valley's beauty is amplified by the perennial Darhal River, which carves it into two near-equal halves.

Geography and Climate

Darhal Valley enjoys a moderate to cool climate, often more pleasant than Jammu or Srinagar. Historical data of the annual temperature range in Darhal, Jammu & Kashmir indicates that the hottest months, like July, can see average maximum temperatures around 32°C (90°F) and average minimum temperatures of 6°C (43°F). Conversely, the coldest months, December and January, can experience average minimum temperatures around -15°C (5°F) and average maximum temperatures around 0°C (32°F). This suggests an annual temperature range of roughly 32°C (57°F) between the hottest and coldest months (Search Labs | AI Overview).

Culture

The valley is a vibrant tapestry of Pahari and Gogri culture, weaving together influences from Urdu, Hindi, Dogri and Kashmiri traditions. The primary languages spoken are Pahari and Gogri and the locals are renowned for their hospitality, bravery and deep-rooted traditions. Despite exposure to the modern world through the internet, the people of Darhal lead simple, authentic lives.

Demographics and History

Spanning 92 square kilometers, Darhal Valley is a rural tehsil in Rajouri District, established in 2004, comprising 12 villages. The Malik community, primarily of Rajput descent, dominates the region, with historical ties to the Mughal era when they, alongside the Thakars of Sagrawat village, were tasked with guarding passes into Kashmir.

Tourism Potential

Often described as an unexplored paradise, Darhal Valley beholds immense tourism potential. Spiritual seekers are drawn to revered sites like the shrines of Sain Ganji Baba, Jamadar Baba, Baba Mastan Shah, Panthal, Moulana Mohd Hassan and Sain Abdullah. Adventure enthusiasts find ample opportunities for trekking to breathtaking destinations such as Shakkar Marg, Khaari Marg, Sarota (the vale of flowers) and the region's many lakes and waterfalls. Recent infrastructural developments have transformed the valley's connectivity. Upgraded roads now meet national standards, linking Thannamandi and Budhal. With the Kharimarg road sanctioned and expected to be completed within two to three years the meadows falling above the treeline will be connected to Darhal valley which in turn could be extended to the Mughal Road joining it at Pir ki Gali, creating a scenic tourist circuit that enhances access to the Pir Panjal's seven prominent lakes and numerous meadows (margs), further boosting its appeal.

Budhkanari: The Gateway to Waterfalls

Nestled along the banks of the Darhal Tawi at the foothills of lush, forested mountains, Budhkanari is a picturesque hamlet serving as the perfect base for waterfall enthusiasts and trekkers. The Government of Jammu & Kashmir has constructed two tourist bungalows here, ideal as base camps for treks to Shakkar Marg, Khari Marg and the many cascading waterfalls. These waterfalls, scattered across the verdant mountains, offer a refreshing retreat for visitors seeking solace from summer heat. The best time to visit is May to June, when temperatures are high and rainfall is minimal, ensuring safe exploration. From mid-June to mid-July, monsoon rains swell the waterfalls, transforming them into majestic, roaring spectacles though their intensity may pose challenges for some adventurers.

Exploring the Waterfalls of Darhal: A Journey to Abdullah Waterfall, Khoriwali Chamm, Khodan wala Cham, Khor Nar Waterfall, Doodh Chammb, Neela Chamb, Aadangi Waterfall and Khund Waterfall

Immersed in the scenic region of Darhal, visitors are spoiled for choice with access to as many as 20 breathtaking waterfalls which include, all reachable within a day or two. Among these natural wonders, Abdullah Waterfall, Khoriwali Chamm, Khodan wala Cham, Khor Nar Waterfall, Doodh Chammb, Neela Chamb, Aadangi Waterfall and Khund Waterfall stand out as must-visit destinations, each offering a unique experience for adventurers and nature lovers alike.

Abdullah Waterfall: A Gem of Darhal

Located along the Khoriwali-Budhkanari road, Abdullah Waterfall is the crown jewel of Darhal's natural attractions. Named after Sain Abdullah, a revered saint who once used to meditate for hours in a nearby cave, this majestic 25-30meterhigh cascade has captured the hearts of locals and tourists. Discovered just a few years ago by enthusiastic local explorers, its fame spread rapidly, transforming it into one of Darhal's most cherished sites.

In its early days of exploration, reaching Abdullah Waterfall was no easy feat. The steep, undeveloped path posed a challenge for even the most determined visitors. However, responding to growing public interest, the government recently constructed a proper approach path, making the waterfall easily accessible. Now, a short 10-15minute trek from the road leads visitors to the base of this stunning cascade, where the sight of water plunging down the rocky cliffs creates a mesmerizing spectacle with magical impact.

Abdullah Waterfall's blend of natural beauty, historical significance and improved accessibility has cemented its status as Darhal's premier destination. Whether you're a seasoned hiker or a casual sightseer, this waterfall promises an unforgettable experience, inviting all to witness the serene power of nature in the heart of Darhal.

Khoriwali Chamm: A Hidden Cascade

Another captivating destination in Darhal is Khoriwali Chamm, located along the Khoriwali-Barnivali road, just under a kilometre from the Government Middle School Khoriwali. Towering higher than Abdullah Waterfall, this cascade is a striking sight, though its water flow is less voluminous in comparison. The waterfall's charm is best experienced during or shortly after the rainy days, particularly following two to three days of sustained rainfall. Its smaller catchment area

means that the cascade truly comes to life when nourished by recent rains, offering a serene and refreshing spectacle for visitors.

Khodan wala Cham: The Mini Aharbal of Darhal

For those seeking an easily accessible yet enchanting escape, Khodan wala Cham, often dubbed the "Mini Aharbal of Darhal," is a perfect choice. Situated in Budhkanari along the Jalamang rivulet, this waterfall is just a short five-minute walk from the Government Middle School, Budhkanari. Its proximity and ease of access make it an ideal destination for those who prefer a less strenuous journey, including the elderly or those less inclined to trek long distances.

Khodan wala Cham earns its nickname due to its striking resemblance to the renowned Aharbal Waterfall in Kashmir. Particularly in May and June, before the monsoon season, this waterfall offers a refreshing retreat, its gentle cascade providing a soothing respite from the heat. With no demanding physical challenges, Khodan wala Cham welcomes all visitors, making it a beloved spot for those seeking natural beauty without the rigors of a long hike.

Khor Nar Waterfall: A Perfect Blend of Adventure and Accessibility

Ranking as the second most popular waterfall in Darhal after Abdullah Waterfall, Khor Nar Waterfall is a stunning gem located along the Jalamang branch of Darhal tawi. Reachable in about an hour from Budhkanari, this waterfall requires a moderate 2-kilometer trek, making it an ideal adventure for those seeking a balance between exploration and ease. Its strategic location-neither too deep in the forest nor too close to the road-makes it accessible to a wide range of visitors, from those hesitant to venture far into the wilderness to those craving a touch of adventure.

The path to Khor Nar Waterfall features a gentle slope, requiring only moderate physical effort, which makes it suitable for most visitors. Its picturesque setting, framed by the natural beauty of Darhal's landscape, ensures a rewarding experience. Whether you're an avid trekker or a casual explorer, Khor Nar Waterfall offers a perfect blend of scenic splendor and approachable adventure, solidifying its place as a beloved destination in the valley.

Doodh Chammb: The Milky Marvel

Tucked away at a distance of half a kilometre from Khorinar waterfall that hardly takes half an hour in the serene atmosphere lies the waterfall known as Doodh Chammb. It is often hailed as one of the most beautiful of Darhal's waterfalls. Its name, meaning "milk waterfall," is inspired by the frothy, bubbling flow of water that resembles milk cascading down the rocks. According to local legends, villagers in ancient times used the cool waters of this waterfall to preserve their dairy produce, adding a touch of historical charm to its allure.

Doodh Chammb captivates visitors with its ethereal beauty, as the churning water creates a mesmerizing, milky-white spectacle. Accessible with relative ease, it offers a tranquil escape for those looking to immerse themselves in nature's splendor without a strenuous journey. This waterfall's unique visual appeal and cultural significance make it a standout destination, inviting visitors to experience its serene magic and connect with Darhal's rich heritage.

Aadangi Waterfall: A Double-Floor Delight

Named after the nearby dhok, Aadangi Waterfall is a captivating double-floor cascade

that enchants visitors with its unique structure and serene surroundings. Reachable in approximately one hour from Doodh Chamby/Milky waterfall, this gem is nestled amidst towering conifers and lush vegetation, which enhance the area's breathtaking beauty. The misty droplets of its cascading waters create a soothing ambiance, offering a perfect refuge for those yearning to reconnect with nature.

Aadangi Waterfall's tranquil setting and refreshing mist provide a calming escape, melting away stress and rejuvenating the mind. Whether you're seeking a peaceful retreat or simply wish to bask in the splendor of Darhal's natural landscape, Aadangi Waterfall invites you to immerse yourself in its serene embrace, making it a must-visit destination for nature enthusiasts.

Neela Chamb: A Serene Haven Amidst Greenery

At a distance of one and half hour from Aadangi Chammb is nestled in a verdant embrace, Neela Chamb. It derives its name from the lush greenery surrounding where the local term for green is poetically referred to as "blue." This waterfall stands out as one of Darhal's most serene destinations, offering a tranquil setting perfect for camping. The experience of pitching a tent near Neela Chamb, enveloped by the soothing sounds of cascading water and the vibrant greenery, is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

From Aadangi Neela Chamb is easily accessible yet feels like a hidden sanctuary. Its peaceful ambiance and natural beauty make it an ideal spot for those seeking a quiet retreat or a memorable outdoor adventure. Whether you're camping under the stars or simply soaking in the serene atmosphere, Neela Chamb promises an unforgettable connection with nature's tranquility.

Khund Waterfall

Tucked away in the remote Dhok Khund, Khund Waterfall captivates those brave enough to seek its hidden charm. Its stunning beauty, with swirling waters creating a peaceful atmosphere, offers a calm retreat for travellers. Reaching this enchanting spot is no easy task, requiring effort to navigate rough trails and twisting paths. But the tough journey makes the reward even sweeter, drawing adventurers to this natural wonder. The waterfall's striking appearance and deep cultural importance make it a special place in Darhal, calling to explorers eager to discover its quiet magic. Tied to the area's rich history, Khund Waterfall showcases nature's beauty, saved for those ready to travel far from the usual routes. This secluded gem promises an unforgettable adventure, blending the thrill of exploration, peaceful surroundings, and a connection to Darhal's heritage. For those who make the effort, the waterfall offers a unique experience, combining breathtaking views with a sense of discovery and cultural richness in a truly remarkable setting.

Sargosh Aabshar: The Whispering Waterfall

Hidden within the verdant folds of the Jalamang River valley, near the quiet path of the dense woods of Jalamang and Suvaey, Sargosh Aabshar-known as the Whispering Waterfall-stands as a beacon of tranquility. This secluded haven, far removed from the clamor of modern life, offers a sanctuary for those yearning for peace and introspection. Distant from the noise of crowds, this gentle cascade calls to those seeking calm and spiritual renewal. Its soft waters, flowing over moss-covered rocks, whisper tales of the olden times, encouraging reflection and tranquility. Unlike louder waterfalls, Sargosh Aabshar speaks quietly, providing a soothing strength that calms

the spirit.

Encircled by lush greenery and misty air, the waterfall creates a serene haven for wanderers and seekers. Its secluded spot, free from the bustle of everyday life, nurtures a deep bond with the natural world. Each droplet feels like a gentle blessing, refreshing the mind and uplifting the soul. The steady murmur of water mingles with the rustle of leaves, forming a melody that touches the heart.

Sargosh Aabshar is not a grand display for crowds but a quiet refuge for those craving solitude and divine connection. It embodies the beauty of stillness, inviting visitors to pause, reflect, and find balance. For those looking to step away from the ordinary and embrace something timeless, this whispering waterfall offers a tranquil sanctuary, where the soul finds peace and the heart rediscovers calm.

Jawdar Chammb/Pigeon waterfall: Bela River's Hidden Gem

At a distance of about an hour and along the tranquil Bela River near Shakkar Marg, stands Pigeon Waterfall; a serene escape into nature's embrace. Away from bustling crowds, this cascade captivates with its gentle flow, tumbling over smooth rocks into a crystal-clear pool below. The soft murmur of water, mingling with the charm of surrounding lush meadows, creates a soothing melody that invites peace and reflection.

Encircled by lush meadows, Pigeon Waterfall offers a quiet retreat for those seeking solace. Its secluded location, accessible via a scenic path near Shakkar Marg, feels untouched by time, fostering a deep connection with the natural world. Sunlight falling directly on the pristine waters of the fall, casting dappled patterns on the water's surface, while the cool mist refreshes weary travellers. The waterfall's modest size belies its charm, drawing visitors with its understated beauty and calming presence.

Ideal for introspective wanderers and nature lovers, Pigeon Waterfall is a haven for quiet contemplation. It beckons those who wish to pause and immerse themselves in the simplicity of the moment. Whether sitting by the river's edge or dipping toes in the cool pool of waters, visitors find a sense of renewal and completeness. This hidden gem along Bela River stands as a testament to nature's quiet allure, offering a timeless sanctuary where the heart finds calm and the soul rediscovers harmony.

A Call to Discover Darhal's Hidden Treasures

Darhal's waterfalls, with their breathtaking beauty and diverse appeal, offer an enchanting alternative to the well-trodden paths of Kashmir; Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chenab valley and other popular destinations. From the majestic Abdullah Waterfall to the serene Neela Chamb and the unique double-floor Aadangi Waterfall, Darhal presents a pristine haven for adventurers, families and those seeking solace in nature's embrace. These cascades, framed by lush conifers and vibrant greenery, provide a refreshing escape that rivals the charm of more renowned locations. Darhal can be visited as an alternate, short term and low budget destination for public to explore its hidden treasures, where the soothing sounds of cascading waters and the untouched beauty of the landscape promise unforgettable memories. Pack your bags, lace up your shoes and discover why Darhal is a must-visit destination for nature lovers seeking an off-the-beaten-path adventure. People in numbers from Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh etc have already started visiting these destinations and have enjoyed in lots. Now, it's your turn.

