

Tourism Potential and Prospects in Thane District of Maharashtra

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Abstract:

Tourism has become a vital catalyst for regional progress, contributing to economic diversification, cultural enrichment, and environmental stewardship. Thane District in Maharashtra holds considerable promise in this regard due to its varied natural settings, historic monuments, religious landmarks, and expanding urban infrastructure. This paper evaluates the tourism prospects of Thane District by examining its physical geography, major attractions, and spatial distribution of tourist sites, transportation linkages, and future development opportunities. This paper uses the secondary qualitative and quantitative data. Key destinations including Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary, Masunda Lake, Mahuli Fort, and the culturally significant Ambarnath Shiv Mandir, an outstanding example of 11th-century Hemadpanthi architecture which illustrate the district's broad tourism portfolio. Findings suggest that although Thane's tourism assets are rich and diverse, development across destinations is inconsistent, largely influenced by accessibility and promotional efforts. With strategic interventions focusing on sustainable infrastructure, conservation, and integrated planning, Thane District can strengthen its position as a leading regional tourism hub while maintaining ecological balance and cultural integrity.

Keywords: Thane, Tourism, Regional Development

1. INTRODUCTION:

Tourism involves the temporary relocation of individuals from their usual place of residence to other destinations for leisure, recreation, pilgrimage, business, or related purposes. It comprises a dynamic system of attractions, transport networks, accommodation services, and cultural interactions that collectively shape visitor experiences and influence regional development.

2. Objective:

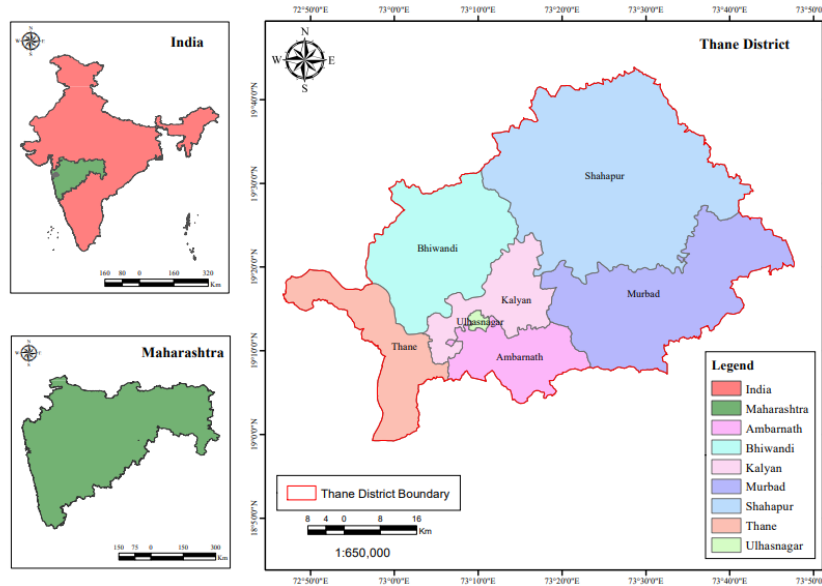
1. To study the existing tourist places in the study region.
2. To find out the tourist potential of Thane district.
3. To suggest strategies for the development of tourism in Thane district.

4. Study Area:

Thane district is situated between 18°42' and 20° 20' North latitude and 72°45' and 73°48' East longitude. Thane district is bounded by Palghar district to the north, Nashik district to the northeast, Ahmednagar and Pune districts to the east, the Arabian Sea to the west, Mumbai Suburban district to the

southwest, and Raigad district to the south, giving it a diverse geographic setting that includes coastal areas, hilly terrain, and urban boundaries (Map 1).

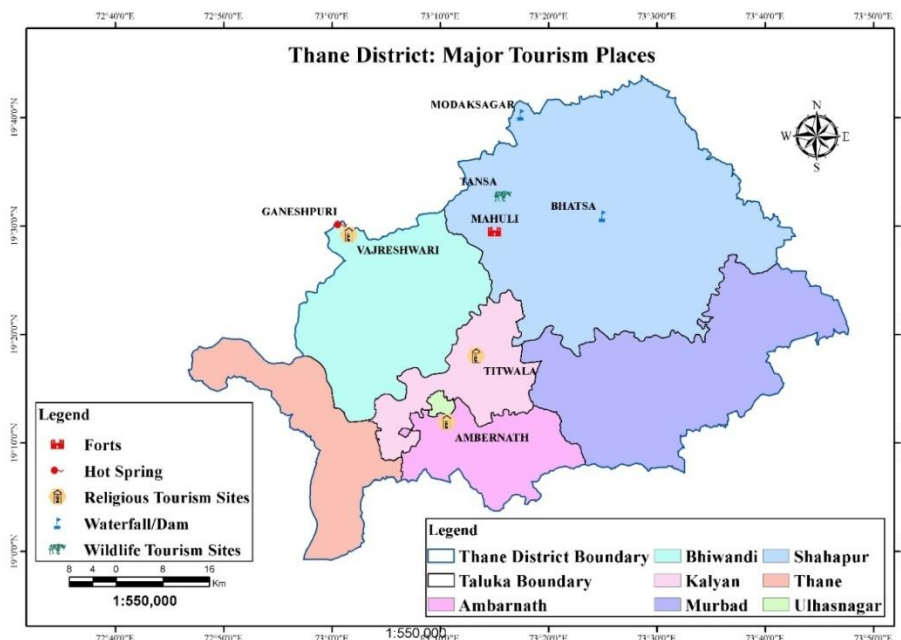
Map. 1 Study Area of Thane District



5. Discussion:

1) Major Tourist Centres in Thane District: The existing tourist centres from Thane district which are spread across seven talukas are discussed as follows (Map 2):

Map 2. Major Tourist Places in Thane District:



a. Ambarnath (Ambernath) Shiv Mandir:

It is located 35 Km from district headquarter Thane by road. It is also accessible by railway via Ambarnath Railway Station on Central Railway,. The Ambarnath Shiv Mandir is among the district’s most prominent religious heritage sites. Constructed around 1060 CE, it showcases intricate Hemadpanthi-style stone architecture. The partly subterranean shrine features elaborate carvings of

deities, mythological motifs, and ornate pillars surrounding the sanctum. It attracts large numbers of pilgrims, particularly during Mahashivratri, and stands as an important cultural landmark with strong potential for heritage-focused tourism initiatives.

b. Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary:

It is located 70 Km from district headquarter Thane by road. Located in Shahapur taluka, Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary covers more than 300 sq. km of preserved forest. It is home to leopards, barking deer, wild boar, various bird species, and other fauna. Eco-tourists and trekking enthusiasts frequent the sanctuary, especially in cooler seasons. The nearby Tansa Lake enhances the appeal for nature-based recreation.

c. Masunda (TaloaPali) Lake:

At the heart of Thane city, Masunda Lake is a major recreational hotspot. It offers boating facilities, pedestrian promenades, food stalls, and cultural gathering spaces. Its central location ensures high daily visitation and makes it a focal point of urban tourism.

d. Titwala Temple:

It is located 47 Km from district headquarter Thane by road and it is also connected by central railways Titwala railway Station. The Siddhivinayak Mahaganapati Temple at Titwala is a significant pilgrimage destination. Devotee numbers rise sharply during festive periods, generating substantial economic activity for local communities through religious tourism.

e. Tungareshwar Wildlife Sanctuary:

It is located 33 Km from district headquarter Thane by road. Tungareshwar comprises forested hills that serve both ecological and religious roles. In addition to being a wildlife corridor, it hosts temple sites that draw pilgrims. Trekkers, nature lovers, and religious visitors frequent the area, emphasizing the need for regulated visitor management and conservation.

f. Yeoor Hills:

Situated within the eco-sensitive zone of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Yeoor Hills provide a popular nature retreat for residents of Thane and Mumbai. Activities such as morning walks, birdwatching, and exploring nature trails attract large numbers of visitors, although the area remains vulnerable to encroachment and unauthorized commercial operations.

g. Upvan Lake:

Upvan Lake functions as both a cultural and recreational landmark. It is well-known for hosting the annual Sanskruti Arts Festival, featuring performances, exhibitions, and community events. It contributes significantly to Thane's cultural tourism landscape.

h. Mahuli Fort

It is located 61 Km from district headquarter Thane by road. It is also connected by Central railway's Asangaon Railway Station. Mahuli Fort, located near Asangaon, is a preferred destination for trekkers and adventure tourists. Surrounded by dense forests and striking cliffs, the fort offers historical insight into Maratha-era architecture and sweeping views of the surrounding terrain.

i. Vajreshwari Temple

The **Shree Vajreshwari Yogini Devi Mandir** is a Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess **Vajreshwari**, located in the town Vajreshwari, 75 km away from Mumbai. The town, earlier known as Vadvali, was renamed Vajreshwari in honour of the presiding deity of the temple.

The original temple of Vajreshwari was at Gunj, five miles (8 km) north of Vadavli. It was moved to Vadvali after its destruction by the Portuguese. In 1739, Chimaji Appa - the younger brother and military commander of Peshwa Baji Rao I - had set up camp in the Vadvali region on his way to capture

the Portuguese-held Bassein Fort of Vasai. The fort was unconquerable even after a three-year war. Chimaji Appa prayed to goddess Vajreshwari that if he could conquer the fort and defeat the Portuguese, he would build a temple to her.

j. Ganeshpuri Hot Water Spring

Ganeshpuri is about 2 km away from Vajreshwari and is also famous for its natural hot springs. Three of the springs are in the bed of the Tansa River, near the temple of Shri Bhimeshvar and they have reservoirs built round them. One of them is called Gorakh Machhindar. Two of the hot springs are in natural hollows in the rock.

In Ganeshpuri village just behind the main temple is a small Shiva shrine with tanks in front that hold the water of some of the hot-water springs. The hot water is 52°C. Agni Kund is another hot water spring near the village. The quaint little town revolves around the Nityananda Mandir, built to honour the Saint Nityananda who took Samadhi here, in the 1960s. The temple and its surroundings are still serene, and one can sit peacefully.

6. Spatial Pattern of Tourist Places:

Tourist destinations in Thane District exhibit a distinctly clustered spatial arrangement, distributed across three main zones:

1. **Urban Core:** Central Thane hosts high-traffic sites such as Masunda Lake, cultural venues, and commercial spaces.
2. **Eastern Hill and Forest Belt:** Adventure and eco-tourism attractions, including Mahuli Fort and Tansa Sanctuary, are concentrated along the Sahyadri foothills.
3. **Heritage and Religious Node:** Ambarnath Shiv Mandir forms a key historical and cultural cluster with potential to link nearby towns such as Ulhasnagar and Badlapur in thematic tourism circuits.

7. Classification of Tourist Centres and Infrastructure Development in Thane District:

Table no. 1 reveals the Classification of Tourist Centres and Infrastructure Development in Thane District. Thane District has total **37 tourist centres** and all of them belong to **Category C** tourist centres which mean they are popular only at district level.

However, total spending on tourist infrastructure is Rs. 1843 Lakhs in the year 2023-24. Murbad and Shahapur Taluka have 10 tourist places each and spending was highest amongst all talukas followed by Ambarnath and Thane. In spite of historical background of Kalyan taluka, No funds was given for tourist infrastructure development. If more funds added to other major talukas and their tourist centres, rapid improvement could be seen in utilising tourist potential of entire districts. In order to use full potential of tourism in district the funds should be spent not only on civil infrastructure but also on accommodation, electricity, rapid transport, restaurants, ATM, parking, drinking water, marketing, promotion, branding and security.

Table no. 1 Development Work at Tourist Places in Thane District (Year 2023-24)

District							Thane
Reference Year 2023-24							
Sr. no	Taluka	Classification of Tourist	Number of Tourist	Number of Approved Development Works at Tourist Place			Total expenditure on Development
				Incomplete work	New of Approved	Total Number	

1	2	Places	Places	current year	Work order	of Works	al works at Tourist Places (Figured in Lakhs)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Thane	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	4	0	1	1	271.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
2	Bhiwandi	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	1	0	0	0	0.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
3	Shahapur	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	10	19	25	44	620.87
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
4	Kalyan	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	7	4	7	11	0.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
5	Ulhasnagar	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	1	0	0	0	0.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
6	Ambernath	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	4	7	1	8	300.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
7	Murbad	A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	10	30	82	112	651.56
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00
Total		A	0	0	0	0	0.00
		B	0	0	0	0	0.00
		C	37	60	116	176	1843.00
		D	0	0	0	0	0.00

Source: District Socio-Economic Survey, District Statistical Office, Thane.

Classification of Tourist Centres

Category A- Important Tourist Place at National Level, Category B- Important Tourist Place at State Level

Category C- Important Tourist Place at District Level, Category D- Important Tourist Place at Local Level

8. Connectivity of Tourist Places:

Thane District benefits from a robust transport network:

1. **Road Connectivity:** National Highway 48, state highways, and well-developed local roads interconnect major towns and tourism nodes.
2. **Rail Connectivity:** The Central Railway suburban line provides direct access to Thane, Ambarnath, and Asangaon, while the Western Railway connects coastal areas through Palghar.
3. **Proximity to Mumbai:** Easy access from Mumbai enhances weekend tourism and short-duration visits.
4. **Constraints:** Inadequate last-mile transport options for remote and forested areas limit accessibility during busy seasons.

9. Potential for Development of Tourist Places:

Significant opportunities exist to strengthen tourism development across the district:

1. **Heritage Tourism:** Conservation, interpretation centers, and structured visitor services at Ambarnath Shiv Mandir.
2. **Eco-Tourism:** Community-driven sustainable tourism models for Tansa Sanctuary and Mahuli.
3. **Coastal Tourism:** Improved safety, sanitation, and visitor amenities at beaches such as Uttan and Gorai.
4. **Urban Tourism:** Modernization of recreational infrastructure at Masunda Lake and other urban sites.
5. **Integrated Circuits:** Linking religious, cultural, natural, and historical destinations into cohesive themed routes.

10. Strategies:

a. Planning

Develop a comprehensive district-level tourism plan incorporating zoning regulations, ecological buffer delineation, and carrying capacity assessments.

b. Infrastructure Development

Enhance last-mile connectivity through dedicated shuttle services, directional signage, improved safety facilities, sanitation systems, and nature-trail amenities.

c. Conservation and Visitor Management

Implement permit-based entry to sensitive ecological zones, monitor ecological pressures, and curb unauthorized development activities.

d. Community-Based Tourist

Support local livelihoods through homestay programs, trained guides, craft markets, and agro-tourism initiatives backed by capacity-building and marketing support.

e. Branding and Promotion

Position Thane as a convenient “nature–heritage hinterland” for Mumbai, offering short, high-quality experiential visits.

11. Suggestions:

1. Prioritize heritage restoration and enhanced visitor services at Ambarnath Shiv Mandir.
2. Strengthen last-mile connectivity to coastal, forest, and trekking destinations.
3. Develop a unified “Thane Tourism” brand with strong digital outreach.
4. Implement eco-sensitive policies for forest-based tourism.
5. Promote homestays and small-scale tourism enterprises.
6. Improve safety, sanitation, and infrastructure at beach locations.
7. Provide multilingual interpretation centers and signage across major tourist sites.

12. Conclusion:

Thane District offers a broad spectrum of tourism assets from historic temples and natural sanctuaries to vibrant urban lakes and coastal stretches. This diversity presents significant potential for building a resilient and multifaceted tourism economy. Realizing this potential, however, requires coordinated planning efforts that balance development with conservation. Targeted interventions in heritage preservation, infrastructure enhancement, ecological management, and community engagement can position Thane as a dynamic tourism destination. Through sustainable and inclusive development strategies, the district can achieve long-term cultural, environmental, and economic benefits.

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