

## Floating Island at Parashar Lake – Mystery Behind the Tehla Islet Unravalled

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### Abstract

### Review Article

The Parashar Lake, situated at an altitude of 9000 feet in Mandi district, has an island floating in it. This floating island, which also keeps changing its position within the lake, is an enigma for visitors. But the fabrication of a floating island was not difficult for the great sage Rishi Parashar, who had mastery over fourteen branches of knowledge, including Astrology, Agriculture, Plant Science, Ayurveda, Geology and Hydrology. Floating islands are routinely created in the Dal lake at Srinagar, and utilized for growing vegetables. The technique of fabricating floating vegetable gardens in Kashmir is age old, and was probably devised by the ancient sages, who were contemporaries of Rishi Parashar. The latter Rishi, besides creating such enigmatic landmarks in the ashrams and places named after him, also named these landmarks cryptically, as hints for future generations. Thus, the name of the floating island is Tehla, which is also the name of the village from where one gains access to the hilly Sariska Tiger Reserve in Alwar district of Rajasthan. The rocky terrain of Sariska forest provided safe refuge to the Pandavas during the last year of their exile, when they were supposed to stay incognito.

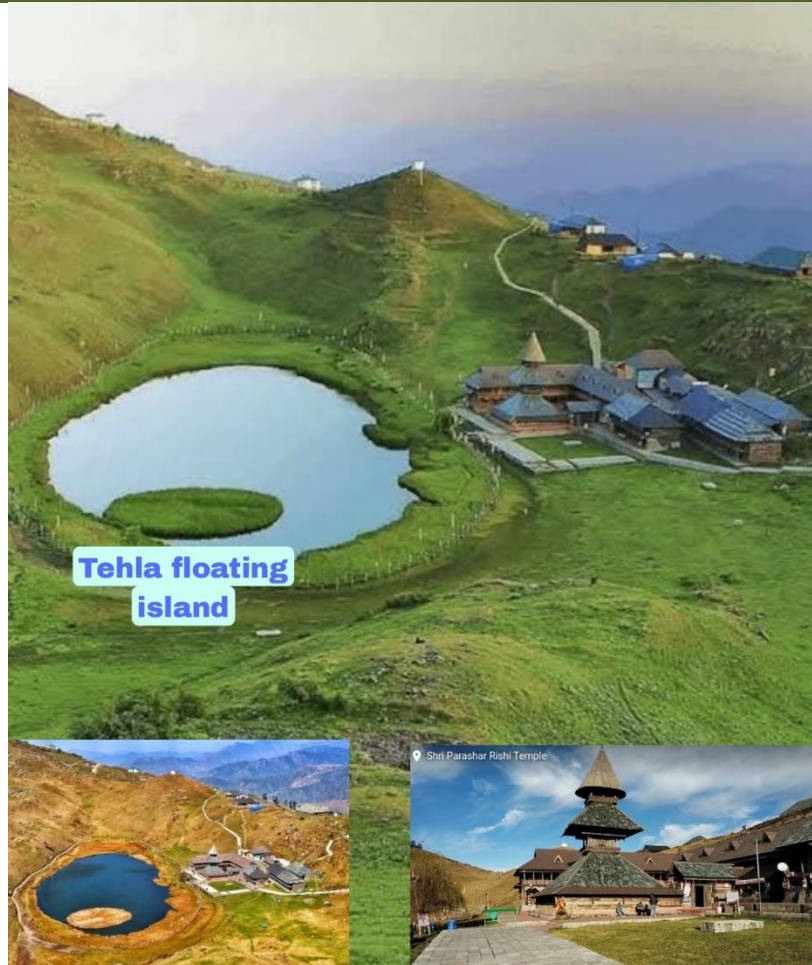
**Keywords:** Parashar lake, floating island, Sariska, Prashar ashram, Dal Lake.

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## INTRODUCTION

The floating island in Prashar Lake, located in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh, is an enigma for all who visit the lake. Situated at a height of 9000 feet above sea level, Prashar Lake is a picturesque bowl-like lake, surrounded by pristine meadows. Near the lake shore,

there is an ancient wooden temple dedicated to Rishi Parashar. It is a beautiful wooden structure, made in the pagoda style. Floating in the clear blue waters of the lake is an island, oval in shape, which is covered with reeds (Figure 1). This island is called Tehla by the local populace, since it changes its position within the lake from time to time (*Tehla* in Hindi means movable).



**Figure 1: The Parashar lake in Mandi district, with the pagoda style temple of Rishi Parashar. Left inset shows the island in dry season, and right inset shows the Parashar temple, built of wood in the pagoda style**

### **Formation of Floating Islands**

Tehla (floating) island in Parashar lake is similar to the floating vegetable gardens in Dal Lake, Srinagar (Figure 2). These floating gardens can be towed from one location to the other, and once the position is

resolved, the floating islands are anchored by tying the ends to willow cuttings (stocks) hammered into the lake bed. The method by which the floating islands are fabricated is described below.



**Figure 2: The floating gardens of Srinagar. These islands can be towed from place to place, depending on the requirement. Inset shows a stand-alone, floating vegetable plot**

**The floating gardens** are formed from weeds, mostly consisting of *Typha augustata* and *Phragmites communis*, growing in the Dal Lake in Srinagar. The boatmen after collecting the weeds, press the roots of one against those of the next, and so on. The muddy and sticky roots of the weeds get so compacted and coalesced that they can hardly be separated [1]. The boatmen then prune the tall culms and what remains is a mat-like floating island (called *radh* in local language).

When the *radh* is sufficiently matured, heaps of weed and mud are extracted from the lake-bed by poles and these heaps are placed at intervals on the *radh*. The heaps are locally known as *Pokhar* and are utilized for growing various vegetables like cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and watermelons [2]. The boatmen can double the thickness of their floating gardens by placing over

them a second layer of weeds after pruning away their aerial stalks. They may similarly place a third layer over the second, and so on, because the islands tend to lose their thickness by the constant play of water underneath. The Mexicans used a similar technique in olden times, to create islands called *Chinampas* [3], Robles, 2018). These *Chinampas* are still in use.

**Parashar lake in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh**

The lake named after Rishi Parashar is located in Mandi district, and can be accessed both from Mandi town and Kullu. The location of the bowl-shaped lake is atop a mountain having a height of 9000 – 10,000 feet above sea level (ASL). Surrounding the lake are verdant meadows where the shepherds from the plains migrate in summers to feed their livestock.



**Figure 3: Location of Prashar Lake in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. The river Beas flows through the district from east to west, and both the Prashar and Shukdev temples are located on high mountain tops close to the river**

The area of the lake is covered with snow in winters, and is accessible only in summers. The mountain top on which the lake is situated, is in the vicinity of the Beas River, which is named after Ved Vyas, son of Parashar. Also in the region, at Thatta, is an ancient temple dedicated to Shukdev, the son of Ved Vyas, and the grandson of Rishi Prashar. So, three generations of sages are represented in this mountainous region of Mandi district.

In the semi-arid mountainous region of Sariska Tiger Reserve, in Alwar district of Rajasthan also, there is an ashram of Rishi Prashar. This locale, situated on a rocky precipice, is on the periphery of the forested tiger reserve, and boasts of a perennial spring (Figure 4). Water from the spring fills up a rocky pool, and flows down the precipice as a waterfall.



**Figure 4: The cottage of Sage Prashar, where the sacred fire pit (*Dhuna*) is located, is situated midway on the climb to the top of the cliff. Near the *Dhuna*, in the sheer cliff face, are present two caves, which would have provided shelter to the sage**

The top of the precipice overlooks the southern access into the isolated and mountainous, crab shaped deciduous forest. Strategically, this vantage point become very important, to monitor the entry of unwanted intruders, in order to protect those hiding inside the Sariska forest. This was precisely the situation, when the five Pandavas utilized these dense rocky forests as their hiding retreat during the last year of their exile, a period during which their location was mandated to be kept secret. The condition laid down was that, in case their whereabouts were revealed during their last year of exile,

the Pandavas would have to again undergo the entire period of exile. Hence the imperative to keep away intruders. Also necessary for political reasons, was the requirement for such a suitable hiding place to be located, not very far away from Hastinapur and the erstwhile capital of the Pandavas, Indraprastha. The mountainous forest of Sariska in Virat Nagar (modern day Alwar), situated between Mandawra and Tehla towns, was an ideal place from above points of view.

## Tehla town and fort at Sariska



**Figure 5: The topography of the mountainous Sariska tiger reserve. Sariska can be accessed only through two points, one in the north, and the other in the south, from Parashar ashram and Tehla. These points are shown by purple arrows. Tehla can be seen surrounded by mountains**

The town which provides the southern gateway into the Sariska forest is known as Tehla, a word which is similar to the name of the floating island in Prashar Lake. It is striking that the most significant historical feature in both Sariska and Parashar lake, is the ashram of Rishi Parashar in both these locales. The town of Tehla is overlooked by a medieval fort on a hill. The presence of an ancient temple on the hill points towards the existence of a hoary habitation at the site where the fort now stands. It is quite possible that the village of Tehla was once located atop the hill. This seems credible, considering that the whole area tends to get flooded during the rainy season, since it is surrounded on all sides by mountains. During rains, the water falling on the slopes flows down towards the bowl like central area, where Tehla is located (see map, Figure 5). In fact, in the vicinity of Tehla, there are large shallow lakes, and in the rainy season, the whole area gets so flooded, that only

the hill at Tehla remains above water. In this flooded scenario, when observed from the high precipice at Parashar, the Tehla hill would look like an island. Hence the name given to Tehla by Parashar, to associate the two locales with each other. This type of associated naming of spots has been practiced by Parashar at other places too. For instance, the mountain across the one where Prashar Lake is located, is called by the name Manchodri. Manchodri was the name of Parashar's companion, who also went by the names Satyawati and Matsya-gandha. The island in the Yamuna, where Matsya-gandha bore Parashar's son (Ved Vyas), is also known by the name Manchodri [4].

## CONCLUSION

For tourists visiting Parashar lake, the island floating in the lake has always been a source of mystery. How an island can float on water has also intrigued

generations of pilgrims who came to worship at the shrine of Rishi Parashar. But the technique of creating floating islands is age-old in Kashmir, and can be comprehended by witnessing the floating vegetable gardens in Dal Lake. Kashmir has been a pilgrimage spot since ancient times, and has been visited by sages over the millennia. It is quite probable that the method of creating floating vegetable islands in Kashmir was also devised by the ancient Rishies. In any case, the wanderlust of mendicants (*sadhus*) in India, makes it very probable that the Kashmir technique was utilized by Rishi Parashar to create the floating island, called Tehla, at Parashar lake.

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