



India, China and the Nathu La Converting Symbolism into Reality



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Sikkim, through its history, and as part of its cultural sustenance, maintained close links with Tibet. With the arrival of British influence on Sikkim in the late 19th century, these ties were strained; the British India got more interested in Tibet and the markets it offered. Sikkim-Tibet relations reached its nadir with the former's support for the Younghusband Mission (1904) but healed in later years, growing through religious and cultural exchanges and prospering with trade. The repair met with only limited success and atrophied again when geopolitical developments severed this linkage in 1962 when Indo-Tibet trade over the mountain passes - Nathu La and Jelep La in East Sikkim was stopped.

Nathu La was reopened for trade in 2006, but as a border trade. The trade is now into its seventh season, and although its reopening was a historic moment for several reasons beyond just the opportunities it opened for the people of Sikkim and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, it has not lived up to expectations. There are several reasons for this, many of which can be remedied with just a shift in attitude. This brief presents perspectives from Sikkim.

I **DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTHS OVER MOUNTAIN PASSES IN SIKKIM: THE RISE OF NATHU LA & JELEP LA**

Many commentators mistakenly believe that Nathu La and its sister mountain pass, Jelep La, on

This brief is a part of a series on Nathu La within the larger IPCS project on improving connectivity between India and China. Also see the IPCS Task Force report titled "Trans Himalayan Trade and Development 2020: Looking Beyond Nathu La."

the Chola range which marks the eastern border of Sikkim with TAR have traditionally been used by the Sikkimese to trade and travel to Tibet. There are in fact three passes along a straight line on the Chola Range - Cho La, Nathu La and Jelep La.

The Cho La mountain pass was used by the royal family of Sikkim to cross into Tibet, mainly to the Chumbi valley where they had a summer palace. Nathu La and Jelep La were the hubs of yak herders from Tibet and used to access pastures on the Sikkim side. Since there was some traffic on these passes, they were also used for small scale trading by the yak herders and graziers, but the real trade between Sikkim and Tibet was carried out over the passes in the North Sikkim - mostly through Kongra La and also from Chorten Nyima La and some other passes.

It is important to note that the passes on the Chola range lead into Tibet which is geographically the same as Sikkim. Populated markets of Shigatse and Lhasa in the Tibetan plateau lie further north, accessed more directly [by Sikkim] from the passes in the North. Sikkim would traditionally export timber, fruits, spices and the occasional goods procured from British India and bring back salt, gold, precious stones, tea, wool and carpets. This trade was carried out by the Lachenpas and Lachungpas of North Sikkim and the Tibetan yak herders of the Tso Lhamu cold desert of North Sikkim.

Between Nathu La and Kongra La

Though Nathu La today has been reopened for border trade, the mountain passes of North Sikkim, had fallen in disuse for trade. The British focus on the passes in Chola range, remain closed; this



section today is a hard border patrolled by the Indian army and the ITBP, not easily accessed even by the Lachenpas and Lachungpas anymore and is out of bounds even for the yak herders even though it used to be part of their traditional migrations between pastures. The "Fingertip" area of North Sikkim which has flared up as a contested zone between India and China, interestingly, has the Kongra La at its tip. It would be worth considering a softening of this sector with Kongra La added to the list of passes open for border trade between India and China to resolve this conflict. Domestic tourists already skirt the fingertip area while on sightseeing drives to the Gurudongmar lake and as a start, may be border tourism to Kongra La could be explored.

From 1893 to 1962: The Rise and Fall of Nathu La and Jelep La Geopolitical considerations and temptations of finding a new market in unexplored Tibet had the British exploring access routes into Tibet. Trade with Tibet, even of British goods was a monopoly of Nepal till the last decade of the 19th Century. British India had only limited influence over Nepal and the latter was very protective about its monopoly. The other alternative was Bhutan, which remained outside British influence at the time, and more importantly has poor infrastructure.

Sikkim, however, was already a British Protectorate, had a British Political Officer [in charge for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet] installed in Gangtok and detailed knowledge about its passes into Tibet already collected. Eventually, the Sino-British Convention of 1893 opened Jelep La and Nathu La for trade. Jelep La became the favourite trade pass, for the simple fact that it was the first pass into Tibet for traders moving up from the closest town of British India to Sikkim – Kalimpong (now a sub-division of Darjeeling district of West Bengal).

The opening of Nathu La and Jelep La to Tibet unravelled a huge logistical challenge to accessing Tibet. Until it was opened in 1893, primary access, as mentioned earlier, was through

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Nepal. Consider the following in terms of distance through Nepal and Sikkim axes: distance from Kathmandu to Lhasa is approximately 1,000 km, while from Nathu La to Lhasa is a mere 520 km.

The mountain passes of East Sikkim are thus the quickest and best developed overland access to Lhasa. In fact, this will be true even for mainland China.

Jelep La evolved gradually for trade since its opening in 1893, working on a limited scale. 1950s remain the heyday of Tibet trade. With the Chinese takeover of Tibet, both the market and demand for goods exploded. During this decade there was an increased trading; all memories of booming trade are sourced to this season - of endless caravans of supplies, of the cavernous warehouses in Kalimpong and of the mechanics brought in from Haryana and stationed in Yatung (in Tibet) to assemble bicycles exported from India over Jelep La. Over the years, Jelep La had evolved as the trading pass and Nathu La used more for diplomatic crossovers. In the 1950s traders based in Sikkim made a formal representation to Jawaharlal Nehru to open Nathu La for traders from Gangtok. Nathu La is more easily accessed by Gangtok than Jelep La which is more convenient for Kalimpong.

After the furious boom of the 1950s, the border was closed within a 48 hour notice on 25 May 1962. This sudden closure caused huge losses to Indian traders who had to abandon stocked warehouses in Tibet and flee and lost all deposits maintained in the Bank of China which had a branch in Kalimpong.

II REOPENING NATHU LA: INDIA'S REALPOLITIK

The reopening of Lipulekh and Shipki La for border trade in 1991, have rekindled the hope in Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front elected in 1994 had included the reopening of Nathu La as one of its election manifesto. This was included in the SDF Government's first memorandum of demands to the Union Government in January 1995. The memorandum promoted the idea of improving relations with the soft border approach.

This demand was reiterated in every memorandum since then the breakthrough finally arrived during then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's China visit when the reopening of Nathu La was announced in June 2003.

The Lipulekh and Shipkila border openings had met with very little success, so it is unlikely that the Union government was excited by the prospects of Nathu La. Tibet trade's heydays were before

Sikkim became a constituent unit of India. Sikkim merged with India only in 1975, thirteen years after its borders had closed for trade. The trade prospered for Indian traders, but the trade regulations were monitored by the Ministry of External Affairs before 1962 years, and it is unlikely that the Ministry of Commerce & Industries or the Finance Ministry [which are responsible for Border Trade now] would have done their homework and realised the scale this border had potential for.

So why is the Union government keen on reopening yet another border pass for border trade? As mentioned, Sikkim merged with India only in 1975. China, however, did not recognise this merger and continued to record Sikkim as an independent country in all maps produced by it. It does not claim Sikkim as a part of Tibet, but had not recognised it as a part of India either. Only in the very rare occasion did it make an issue of it, but this was a thorn it had in India's sides to twist from time to time to embarrass India. Border Trade over Nathu La, if China agreed, would thus be a masterstroke for India because border trade with India on a mountain pass in Sikkim would mean de facto recognition of Sikkim's merger with India. The Union government was obviously keen and after the agreement was inked in 2003, confirmation of the change in attitude arrived in 2005 when the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao present his Indian counterpart a map of India – Sikkim was marked in it as a constituent State of India.

Once the objective of de facto recognition of Sikkim merger achieved, Nathu La regressed into what can only be called Border Bravado by both sides. The date of the official reopening kept getting pushed back, ostensibly because China did not want Nathu La to steal the limelight from the Qinghai-Lhasa railway and insisted that Nathu La come after it. Eventually they picked 06 July 2006 for the reopening. The fact that it coincided with the Dalai Lama's birthday cannot be overlooked. That India had lost interest now that the de facto recognition of Sikkim's merger had been achieved was obvious in the scale of preparations which were tacky at best in comparison to what China had laid out. Unfortunately, traders from TAR continue to be escorted from Nathu La to the Indian trade-post of Sherathang by armed ITBP escorts.

III

NATHU LA: CHINA'S RAISON D'ETRE

Many suspect that China plans to flood India with Chinese goods over Nathu La. That is unlikely; India, as the rest of the world, is already flooded with Chinese goods, and these come from the

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ports, and will not come overland. It is likely that China opened a border with some real potential for trade [unlike Shipkila or Lipulekh] to give an obviously restive Tibet excited and occupied. One can speculate, because China has obviously bigger plans for Nathu La than the token border trade it has been opened for. It has to be for something substantial that it will extend recognition of Sikkim's merger with India.

China has perhaps recognised the logistic benefits of Nathu La – it is the shortest access to a port for the most densely populated part of Tibet and offers a more reliable supply route to it via Kolkata even for mainland China. Even in the 1950's, part of the goods moving up from Jelep La were supplies from China to Tibet and even diplomatic packages. Infrastructure development in Tibet can obviously be serviced more reliably and at lower costs if the Chinese goods were supplied through Nathu La. If production units are established in the Shigatse-Lhasa belt, goods can be more conveniently shipped out the world over Nathu La. It is obviously for this potential that China is more keen on upgrading Nathu La for bilateral trade

IV

POTENTIALS AND PROMISES OF NATHU LA: PROPOSAL FOR A BETTER FUTURE

Developments across Nathu La, despite the promises and potential it holds is not totally negative. There have been positive trends; albeit limited, there has been an interaction of people and exchange of goods. Obvious signs of aggression have been scaled down along the border, tourism [only domestic tourists allowed] gets a new spin and opportunities have opened for people on both sides. The border trade is also leading to family reunions of Tibetans at Sherathang. What needs to be done further? How to expand this interaction, and convert this symbolism into reality?

Provide better infrastructure in Sherathang: The list of items allowed for trade is obsolete and limiting; regulations imposed on traders is unhealthy, unrealistic and stifling. Not allowing traders to stay overnight at the trade marts (with even Indian traders not allowed to stay back in the Indian trade mart of Sherathang), makes trading inconvenient. This clause has to be relaxed, because the traders have to already face the challenge of unreliable roads., The infrastructure at Sherathang is inadequate even for the official list of goods.

Change the Attitude, especially amongst the Union government officials, the biggest handicap is in the attitude of officials managing the trading. They are either briefed to make trading difficult, or have not been explained their role as facilitators. Regulations remain poorly explained and processes remain unclear, none of which good trading.

Improve the Infrastructure: Nathu La would undoubtedly benefit from better connectivity and improved infrastructure, but what is most urgently required is the right attitude from the Union government and among its officials; adequate course corrections can then be ensured.

Even working with the present list, the potential is substantial if Sikkim is allowed to play its traditional role. In the heydays of Nathu La/ Jelep La, the people of Sikkim benefited by providing warehousing, transportation and allied services to facilitate the trade. Sikkim never produced the goods and the traders were mostly from the plainsmen community, but the State prospered because it sat on the route and provided the allied services.

At present, border trade is exclusively reserved for traders based in Sikkim, but a case needs to be made to ensure a heightened role for Sikkim even when trading is opened for all. Sikkim can be developed for transportation and a warehousing hub opened at Rangpo [the entry-point to Sikkim] so that goods can be shifted to smaller trucks which will be able to negotiate the roads to the passes.

Build Capacity among the Local Youth: If bilateral trade is being seriously planned, then Sikkim youth can be groomed in advance on the nuances of such trade and the paperwork/ permits that need to be secured. Equipped with the language skills,

they can then become consultants and service providers for the trading parties. This list can go on.

Enhance the Trading List: Even working within the present list, a huge potential is being overlooked. Tibet's most voluminous exports over Nathu La/ Jelep La was wool. This wool is used to weave Tibetan carpets and blankets. Tibetan carpets service a huge industry in Nepal at present and is a big economic contributor there.

The ready availability of Tibetan Wool [in the present list of items allowed for trade] should be leveraged to gainfully employ the already trained pool of human resource to supply a ready demand for such carpets in the world market. This has not happened yet because, for one, even though included in the list, importing wool remains a very complicated process and is further handicapped by the lack of adequate warehousing and quarantine facilities at Sherathang. This can be easily corrected.

Explore the Tourism potential of Nathu La: After Nathu La and Jelep La opened more than a century ago, it was not just commerce that moved across the passes, but also pilgrims. Tibetans used this 'quickest' route to travel to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Varanasi on pilgrimage and Mahayana Buddhists from India used it to travel to the holy cities in Tibet. Even Buddhists from West Himalayas are known to have moved as traders through Tibet, carried on as pilgrims to the major towns in Southeast Tibet then come down Jelep La to Kalimpong, moved on to Gaya and Sarnath and then taken trains home. That is the traditional pilgrimage circuit which should be reintroduced to Nathu La. This route will also provide a safer and more comfortable bus ride for Indian tourists headed for Kailash Mansarovar instead of the dangerous trek they currently undertake.

To conclude, Nathu La can grow beyond symbolism, provided the concerned agencies are willing to allow it to prosper. More than anything else, it is attitudes which need to change, and once that is addressed, everything will fall into place. Research organisations and think tanks are important; with their study reports and recommendations, they underline important issues which is holding back historic breakthroughs like the reopening of Nathu La for trade.

Views expressed are author's own

