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Nathu La

A Trip Report

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Nathu La: Amidst the “Listening Ears”

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The Institute organized a national conference in collaboration with Sikkim University in February 2012 in Gangtok. The following took part from outside Sikkim: Prof. Madhu Bhalla (Professor, Chinese Studies, Delhi University), Mr Ravi Bhootalingam (Distinguished Fellow, IPCS), Mr Jayadev Ranade (Distinguished Fellow, CAPS), Me Gen Dhruv Katoch (Additional Director, CLAWS), Amb (retd) TCA Rangachari (Director, Academic of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia), D. Suba Chandran (Director, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies), Dr. Vijaylakshmi Brar (Associate Professor, Manipur University), Ms. Teshu Singh (Research Officer, IPCS), Ms. Bhavna Singh (Research Officer, IPCS), Ms. Namrata Hasija (Research Officer, IPCS) and Mr. Amal (Associate Researcher, Manipur University).

As part of the conference ‘Sino-Indian Economic Dialogue from Bilateral Trade to Strategic Partnership’ an entire session focussed on ‘Sino-Indian Trade and the Significance of Nathu La’. With four papers on different aspects of Sino-Indian trade via Nathu La (*Nathu La means the pass of listening ears*) there was a diverse discussion on issues involving the volume of trade, infrastructure, security and its socio-economic impact on Sikkim. To further this discussion and also the Institute’s understanding of Nathu La, a trip was planned to visit the Pass on 28th February 2012. The team consisted of Prof. Madhu Bhalla, Dr. Suba Chandran, Dr. Vijaylakshmi Brar, Ms. Teshu Singh, Ms. Bhavna Singh, Ms. Namrata Hasija and Mr. Amal.

A small village, actually a group of shops on the way to Nathu La





Road to Nathu La

The quest for the journey however, had already begun in Delhi with Teshu, our coordinator for the conference, organizing the trip to Nathu La. However, the planning started with hiccups as the only day that available for visiting Nathu La was 28 February, a Tuesday. And, Nathu La Pass remains open only for Indian nationals from Thursday to Sunday. However, Teshu was advised by our co-organizers at Sikkim University to ask for help from those known to us in the army who could get us a pass . With the help of Maj Gen. Katoch therefore we got permits for visiting Nathu La. Nevertheless, a Restricted Area Permit (RAP) is required to visit the site even on the days it is open for public. Upon reaching Sikkim we found that this permit could be easily arranged by any authorized ‘Sikkim Tourism’ agent. One needs to submit an ID proof and two passport-sized photographs of each person visiting the Pass. One can also get the permit themselves by requesting for permission to visit Nathu La through Armed Forces and Sikkim Tourism authorities from MG Road’s tourist information centre right at the entrance of the road. If one submits their ID proof and photographs in the evening, the permit is ready to be collected by the next morning. Nathu La Pass along with Changu Lake (Tsongmo) can be covered in a day’s trip.

First Impressions

The journey began from our guesthouse in Gangtok around 7 A.M. in two Innovas. The distance between Nathu La and Gangtok is 54 km and our driver assured us that we would reach Nathu La in three hours. The roads in the beginning were narrow. We got the feeling that roads barely existed on JN Marg that connected Nathu La to Gangtok. The stretch was full of stones and boulders, rubble and dust, dotted with villages and Army establishments. Our driver told us that we were on a pathway that had witnessed many landslides in the past. Our initial impression was that most of this happened after the earthquake in Sikkim. However, the driver told us that the devastation caused by the earthquake was in North Sikkim and not in East Sikkim. We soon realized that the whole route was not bad; some patches had excellent roads.

We were caught between ravines – so deep that looking down one could make your heart skip a dozen beats – and mountain walls that showed signs of human intervention. Work under the Border Roads Organization’s (BRO) Swastik project was in full swing with Army convoys and JCBs creating rare traffic jams, as we went



*Broadening of the road
to Nathu La in progress*

during a time when Nathu La was closed for both trading and tourists. Our driver informed us that during peak season the jams are a nuisance and increase the travelling time. The local residents have opened shops for tourists all along the way up to the Changu Lake which has almost everything a tourist might need on the way to Nathu La. The supplies ranged from gloves, eatables, liquor, paid washrooms to souvenirs. We also spotted ATMs on the way and were actually delighted to find them at such a height. Axis bank has its ATM at the highest point.

Baba Harbhajan Singh's *mandir* came on our way to Nathu La and we decided to visit it on our way back. We were warned by our driver that if we did not reach on time the harsh winds would make it impossible for us to climb up. However, the driver told us that Baba was a soldier and the legend goes that while escorting a mule caravan from his battalion headquarters in Tekula to Dengchukla, he fell into a fast flowing stream and drowned. Later he appeared in the dreams of his fellow soldier and informed him to look for his body at a particular spot and asked for a shrine to be built at the spot. To the surprise of his companion his body was found at the spot and respecting his wishes, a shrine was built there. The belief that still prevails strongly is that Baba Harbhajan Singh warns against the dangerous activities on the border through the dreams of fellow army men and all the offerings in the temple are still sent to his family.

As the story ended we realized that we were about to reach Nathu La and we immersed ourselves in clicking pictures and enjoying the scenic beauty around. Clouds had decided to shed their beauty and be shapeless. The confused clouds cozily placed themselves next to each other. The sky was painted with not just one, but many hues of blue. As we neared the Pass, the weather started getting blurred and making it difficult to see Kanchenjunga when pointed out by our driver. We also realized that the road had become extremely broad and the wind was much stronger now.

At Nathu La: Trade and Military Post

We passed the Sherathang market; about 5 km from Nathula which was obviously shut as the trading season starts from May. We had to leave our vehicles a few paces away from Nathula Pass. From there we had to climb steps to reach Nathula Pass. Our family and friends had advised us to avoid rushing up these stairs, as at 14000 feet, we could easily get out of breath quickly. As soon as we came out of our vehicles, in a sort of

reflex action, all of us took out our cameras. We took a minute to stare at the gate that said Nathu La and recollected all that we had heard and read about the Pass, the war and border trade.

Through the gate we walked up the stairs. With strong winds blowing it was a little difficult to climb up the stairs, click photographs and look around. The first major structure on our way up was a war memorial dedicated to the soldiers killed in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Climbing a little further we saw a sign pointing towards a cafe and also indicating that we were at 14000 ft. At the top was an army structure, which was not open to the general public. After crossing that we finally reached our destination, the Nathu La Pass. Upon arrival, we met a couple of Indian soldiers and out of sheer curiosity one of us asked where the Chinese territory started from. He pointed towards two barbed wires; one was 'Indian' and the other was 'Chinese'. It is then that we realized that Nathu La Pass, even though a border area, does not have a 'no mans land' normally found in border areas. Here, the border consists of just a barbed wire and two armies guarding their side of the land.

We saw army settlements on both side of border. The Indian soldiers asked us whether we wanted to shake hands with the Chinese soldiers. We shook our heads in affirmation. One of the Indian soldiers called the Chinese soldier in Hindi and beckoned him to come to the point where we were standing. To our surprise

Shaking hands with a Chinese soldier across the Sino-Indian border in Nathu La



the Chinese soldier obliged him immediately and came and shook hands with each one of us with a smile. We greeted him with a 'Ni Hao', much to his surprise. However, he chose to smile instead of saying anything. After getting photographed with him we started observing things around and talking to the Indian soldiers. The soldiers told us, while we were shivering, that Nathu La Pass is not navigable in winters as it receives heavy snowfall. Temperatures dip to -25 °C in winters with harsh winds. He also showed us the gate of the Nathu La business channel, which was closed.

Behind us was a building with the tricolor proudly fluttering, bringing out the Indian in each one of us, which we were a little apprehensive in displaying due to the 'academic training' instilled in us about how not to be jingoist. However, it was Prof. Madhu Bhalla who said 'Jai Hind' while clicking our photos with the Indian soldiers and we all happily joined in saying 'Jai Hind'. We then observed that we were standing in front of a building with excess of red and golden pillars and a star on its forehead. We walked close to it and hey! What were we seeing? There was a fence. Err, so that was C-H-I-N-A. That was China! The Indian building however, had colourful pictures of Sino-Indian cultural exchanges, Buddhism and Indian monuments on it unlike the monolithic Chinese structure. Later on Dr. Chandran pointed out that right at the centre of the pictures was a picture of Dalai Lama staring right at the Chinese building!

After that we climbed up to the Indian hut which accommodated only one Indian soldier who was on duty to guard the post. After getting photos clicked there we walked back and reached the Indian army building and to make our trip to Nathu La documented we took or 'bought' the certificates of our visit from the army office. We then started walking towards the café to get something hot to drink and eat.

Along the Sino-Indian border with the Indian soldiers in Nathu La. Chinese building behind, across the border.





An Indian Soldier guarding the border at Nathu la. Indian and Chinese huts across the border

However, there was no one to serve us at the café which remains closed on days that tourists cannot visit Nathu La. We then decided to eat something at the Changu Lake and Baba *mandir* which we had decided to see on our way back. So finally we climbed down the stairs and started our return journey.

Water and Ice: The Tsongmo/Changu Lake

After a 2000 feet downhill drive there comes a splendid blue water lake called Changu Lake. It is literally known as the 'source of the lake' in Bhutia language. The lake is situated at an altitude of 12,000 ft on the Gangtok Nathula highway. The Tsongmo Lake (also called Changu Lake or Tsomgo Lake) was calm and beautiful. It falls in the restricted area and hence an Inner Line Permit (ILP) is required by Indians to visit this place. Foreign nationals are not permitted to visit this lake without special permission. The lake is about 1 k.m. long, oval in shape, 15 meters deep and is considered sacred by the local people.

The moment we got out of our vehicles, the yak owners started shouting to strike a deal to take us for a ride on those animals. We asked how much it would cost to take a ride on the yak. They said INR 950 per person. Suddenly we heard a Marwari haggling with them and asking one yak owner to take him for INR 30 which surprisingly he agreed to. In the time we took to decide and wait for our other vehicle to come strong and chilly winds started blowing. We decided not to take the ride but to go and visit the market nearby. Before going to the market we decided to take a few pictures with the yaks. Yaks, to my surprise, seemed completely harmless.

The Local Market

By the time we finished clicking the photos, we had started shivering because of the cold and the winds were becoming unbearable. All of us heaved a sigh of relief when we reached the market after climbing down some stairs. At least we were saved from the winds. So we had shops on both sides of the road downhill which according to our



Changu Lake, mostly frozen

driver had 'cheap goods' from across the border especially jackets, shoes and crockery. Much to our surprise all the items were not in the trading list, and we were reminded of the intense discussions we had at the conference and also with local media people in Gangtok. I could see Chinese flasks, cups and clothes all around me. But before we could start our shopping spree we wanted to eat and drink something hot.

We discovered that all the shops had provisions for some hot soup and *Maggie*. While waiting for it we decided to explore the shop where we were eating. Some of us wanted to buy crockery so the driver asked the shop owner where we could find porcelain cups. Our driver took us to the shop where we could get the cups but unfortunately the shopkeeper informed us that because the day was closed for tourists she has only two sets of cups and plates. Though disappointed we bought both the sets and also shopped for some clothes. By the time we reached back hot soup and *Maggie* were waiting for us. The bowl of *Maggie* and soup were the world's best food for us at that time as we were frozen to our bones. After a wonderful meal we started to explore the market but still could not find those cups. However, there were many other interesting things to buy and we roamed for another 15 minutes around the market. We stopped at another shop for some coffee.

After finishing our coffee we decided to start on our journey back to Gangtok. On our way back we could not stop ourselves from discussing about the wonderful trip that we had, and even though it has been a while since we have been back, we still tell everyone that 'the best part of our Sikkim trip was our visit to Nathu La'.