

# SIKKIM SEES OPPORTUNITY IN HOLY TRAIL

Tour operators in the State eye benefits from the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra via Nathu La, even as doubts persist over its feasibility

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The recent announcement of an alternate route to Kailash Manasarovar through Nathu La in Sikkim has triggered a wave of excitement among tour operators and the State Government, as it is likely to boost the State's tourism industry which is a primary source of income for many. However, tour operators and travel agencies are concerned about the feasibility of this route through the State and wonder how the new arrangement will pan out in one of the most important religious tours in the Hindi pilgrim's calendar, one in which lakhs of people participate.

## Nascent Stage

During his visit to Sikkim, Union Minister for Development of North Eastern Region VK Singh maintained that India still needs to finalise several issues over the annual pilgrimage. 'Whose transport will run beyond Nathu La? If it's their (China's) arrangement, then what will be our role, how will Sikkim benefit? All these issues need to be looked at before activating the new route,' he stated.

The announcement regarding the new route, considered a first step towards fulfilling the long-pending demand of the State Government, can create a boom in Sik-

kim's tourism industry, of course depending on the role it is allowed to play.

## Window of Opportunity

'I'm really excited and looking forward to opening of the Manasarovar Yatra via Nathu La. The new route will be full of adventure. The area is resplendent with birds, butterflies and other exotic forms of wildlife that will attract pilgrims and wildlife enthusiasts alike. For instance, Chumbi Valley is the only habitat in the world for two butterfly species Chumbi Wall and Chumbi White, of which not many photographs are found. This will be a boon for wildlife photographers, of course, provided the Chinese Government allows travel and photography. If this route opens and travel in Chumbi area is allowed, it will be a blessing for enthusiasts like us,' explains Nosang Limboo, a wildlife photographer.

'As we all know, Kailash Manasarovar is one of the holiest places on earth for Hindus and, India being a Hindu-dominated country, religious tourism will peak if the pilgrimage is routed via Sikkim as the travel time would be shorter and more people would participate. Tourism rules and regulations should be strengthened and

government employees should not be just content with collecting taxes, but they should also offer better services,' he adds.

Welcoming plans to open an alternative route to Manasarovar via Nathu La, Gangtok MLA Pintso Chopel Lepcha has demanded that the State capital be made a hub for the annual pilgrimage.

'The State Government should ensure that Gangtok also benefits from the new route. Facilities for immigration and visas should be setup in Gangtok,' he said, adding that transport infrastructure like national highways and the airport should be upgraded and the proposed rail link taken up at the earliest.

Although the new Manasarovar route via Nathu La is expected to boost the tourism industry, everything will depend on the guidelines and policies adopted by New Delhi vis-à-vis documentation and processing of pilgrims' papers.

Governor Shrinivas Dadasaheb Patil has noted, 'The opening of Nathu La, a long-standing demand of Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling, would also open up new opportunities for Sikkimese youth in tourism and other sectors'. Emphasizing the need to move positively in this direction, the Gov-



The Centre's recent announcement to open another route for Manasarovar via the Nathu La pass has caused much excitement among tour operators in Sikkim

ernor stressed boosting livelihood capacity among the youth of Sikkim so that they would be able to encash the opportunity to the maximum extent possible.

### Note of Caution

'It is indeed a big opportunity for the tour operators, transport operators and hoteliers. If the Chief Minister's claim that more than five lakh tourists arrive every year solely for the Manasarovar Yatra proves to be a reality, Sikkim will definitely benefit. However, the question is whether we are prepared to host such large numbers,' says Madan Gurung, owner of Sikkim Peak Tours & Travels.

'Gangtok would be a hub as hordes of tourists would arrive from different parts of the country. To accommodate them, Gangtok needs to be better prepared,' he says.

'However Gangtok or Sikkim


will benefit only if the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) sets guidelines that are tourist-friendly. It should introduce a simplified documentation and verification process,' Gurung adds. He says: 'The State Government should ensure this. Else the benefits will peter out.'

The tour operator also suggests that the State Government organize a reconnaissance trekking expedition to Manasarovar to take stock of the distance and weather conditions there before the route opens, to enable operators like him to plan and organize tours in advance.

### Reality Check

Meanwhile, a preliminary meeting to work out the logistics, timeframe and other matters, besides assessing the preparedness of the State Government to con-

duct the Yatra, was held recently at Gangtok. It was chaired by Additional Chief Secretary SC Gupta and attended by senior officials from Urban Development & Housing Department, Commerce & Industries Department, Tourism Department, Roads & Bridges Department, besides Additional District Collector, East.

The meeting deliberated various issues pertaining to the proposed new route via Nathu La and assessed existing infrastructure such as road conditions. It also discussed the requirement of an acclimatization centre for the pilgrims, while noting that the new developments should not be taken up in isolation but be part of a holistic and integrated plan. 

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Sikkim