

= Nathu La =

Nathu La (Devanagari नथुला ; Tibetan : ལྷནུ་ལ། , IAST : Nṭhā Lā , Chinese : Nathula Pass ; pinyin : Nàdú?lā Shānkū) is a mountain pass in the Himalayas . It connects the Indian state of Sikkim with China 's Tibet Autonomous Region . The pass , at 4 @,@ 310 m (14 @,@ 140 ft) above mean sea level , forms a part of an offshoot of the ancient Silk Road . Nathu means " listening ears " and La means " pass " in Tibetan . On the Indian side , the pass is 54 km (34 mi) east of Gangtok , the capital of Sikkim . Only citizens of India can visit the pass , and then only after obtaining a permit in Gangtok .

Nathu La is one of the three open trading border posts between China and India ; the others are Shipkila in Himachal Pradesh and Lipulekh (or Lipulech) at the trisection point of Uttarakhand , India , Nepal and China . Sealed by India after the 1962 Sino - Indian War , Nathu La was re - opened in 2006 following numerous bilateral trade agreements . The opening of the pass shortens the travel distance to important Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the region and was expected to bolster the economy of the region by playing a key role in the growing Sino - Indian trade . However , trade is limited to specific types of goods and to specific days of the week .

It is also one of the four officially agreed BPM (Border Personnel Meeting) points between the Indian Army and People 's Liberation Army of China for regular consultations and interactions between the two armies , which helps in defusing stand @-@ offs . The four BPM are : Chushul in Ladakh , Nathu La in Sikkim , Bum La Pass in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh , and Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand , 35 kilometres (22 mi) from the Chinese town of Burang .

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== History ==
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Nathu La is located on the 563 km (350 mi) Old Silk Route , an offshoot of the historic Silk Road . The Old Silk Route connects Lhasa in Tibet to the plains of Bengal to the south . In 1815 , trade volume increased after the British annexed territories belonging to the Sikkimese , Nepalese , and Bhutanese . The potential of Nathu La was realised in 1873 , after the Darjeeling Deputy Commissioner published a report on the strategic importance of mountain passes between Sikkim and Tibet . In December 1893 , the Sikkimese monarchy and Tibetan rulers signed an agreement to increase trade between the two nations . The agreement culminated in 1894 when the trade pass was opened .

Nathu La played a vital role in the 1903 - 1904 British expedition to Tibet , which sought to prevent the Russian Empire from interfering in Tibetan affairs and thus gaining a foothold in the region . In 1904 , Major Francis Younghusband , serving as the British Commissioner to Tibet , led a successful mission through Nathu La to capture Lhasa . This led to the setting up of trading posts at Gyantse and Gartok in Tibet , and gave control of the surrounding Chumbi Valley to the British . The following November , China and Great Britain ratified an agreement approving trade between Sikkim and Tibet .

In 1947 and 1948, a popular vote for Sikkim to join newly independent India failed and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru agreed to a special protectorate status for Sikkim. Sikkim agreed to be a protectorate nation and Indian troops were allowed to man its borders, including Nathu La. During this period, more than 1 @, @ 000 mules and 700 people were involved in cross @-@ border trade through Nathu La. In 1949, when the Tibetan government expelled the Chinese living there, most of the displaced Chinese returned home through the Nathu La ? Sikkim ? Kolkata route.

The current Dalai Lama , Tenzin Gyatso , used this pass to travel to India for the 2,500th birthday celebration of Gautama Buddha , which was held between November 1956 and February 1957 . Later , on 1 September 1958 , Nehru , his daughter Indira Gandhi , and Palden Thondup Namgyal (son of ? and internal affairs adviser to ? Tashi Namgyal , the Chogyal of Sikkim) used this pass to travel to nearby Bhutan .

After the People 's Republic of China took control of Tibet in 1950 and suppressed a Tibetan uprising in 1959 , the passes into Sikkim became a conduit for refugees from Tibet . During the 1962

Sino-Indian War, Nathu La witnessed skirmishes between soldiers of the two countries. Shortly thereafter, the passage was sealed and remained closed for more than four decades. Between 7 and 13 September 1967, China's People's Liberation Army and the Indian Army had six day "border skirmishes", including the exchange of heavy artillery fire. In 1975, Sikkim acceded to India and Nathu La became part of Indian territory. China, however, refused to acknowledge the accession at that time.

In 2003, with the thawing of Sino-Indian relations, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China led to the resumption of talks on opening the border. Later in 2004, the Indian Defence Minister's visit to China led to the formal opening of the pass. The opening, originally scheduled for 2 October 2005, was postponed due to last minute infrastructure problems on the Chinese side. Finally, after a decade of talks, Nathu La was opened on 6 July 2006. The date of the reopening, which also formally recognised Tibet as part of China by India and Sikkim's accession to India, coincided with the birthday of the reigning Dalai Lama. In the years before the reopening, the only person permitted to cross the barbed wire frontier had been a Chinese postman with an Indian military escort, who would hand over mail to his Indian counterpart in a building at the border.

The opening of the pass was marked by a ceremony on the Indian side that was attended by officials from both countries. A delegation of 100 traders from India and 100 Tibetans crossed the border to respective trading towns. Despite heavy rain and chilly winds, the ceremony was marked by the attendance of many officials, locals, and international and local media. The barbed wire fence between India and China was replaced by a 10 m (30 ft) wide stone walled passageway. It was also decided to mark the year 2006 as the year of Sino-Indian friendship.

= = Geography = =

The pass is 54 km (34 mi) east of Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim and 430 km (270 mi) from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. In the winter, the pass is blocked by heavy snowfall. Because there is no meteorological centre in Nathu La, systematic measurements of meteorological data (such as temperature and rainfall) are not available for the region. However, it is known that in the higher reaches of the Himalayas around the region, summer temperature never exceeds 15 °C (59 °F).

Nathu La has moderately shallow, excessively drained, coarse, and loamy soil on a steep slope (30 ? 50 %) with gravelly loamy surface, moderate erosion, and moderate stoniness. It has several sinking zones and parts of it are prone to landslides. To preserve the fragile environment of Nathu La on the Indian side, the government of India regulates the flow of tourists. Road maintenance is entrusted to Border Roads Organisation, a wing of the Indian Army. On the Chinese side the pass leads to the Chumbi Valley of the Tibetan Plateau.

= = Flora and fauna = =

Because of the steep elevation increase around the pass, the vegetation graduates from sub-tropical forest at its base, to a temperate region, to a wet and dry alpine climate, and finally to cold tundra desert devoid of vegetation. Around Nathu La and the Tibetan side, the region has little vegetation besides scattered shrubs. Major species found in the region include dwarf rhododendrons (*Rhododendron anthopogon*, *R. setosum*) and junipers. The meadows include the genera *Poa*, *Meconopsis*, *Pedicularis*, *Primula*, and *Aconitum*. The region has a four month growing season during which grasses, sedges, and medicinal herbs grow abundantly and support a host of insects, wild and domestic herbivores, larks, and finches. The nearby Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary has rare, endangered ground orchids and rhododendrons interspersed among tall junipers and silver firs.

There are no permanent human settlements in the region, though it has a large number of defence personnel who man the borders on both sides. A small number of nomadic Tibetan graziers or Dokpas herd yak, sheep and pashmina type goats in the region. There has been intense

grazing pressure due to domestic and wild herbivores on the land . Yaks are found in these parts , and in many hamlets they serve as beasts of burden . The region around Nathu La contains many endangered species , including Tibetan gazelle , snow leopard , Tibetan wolf , Tibetan snowcock , lammergeier , raven , golden eagle , and ruddy shelduck . Feral dogs are considered a major hazard in this region . The presence of landmines in the area causes casualties among yak , nayan , kiang , and Tibetan wolf .

The avifauna consists of various types of laughing thrushes , which live in shrubs and on the forest floor . The blue whistling @-@ thrush , redstarts , and forkails are found near waterfalls and hill @-@ streams . The mixed hunting species present in the region include warblers , tit @-@ babblers , treecreepers , white @-@ eyes , wrens , and rose finches . Raptors such as black eagle , black @-@ winged kite and kestrels ; and pheasants such as monals and blood pheasant are also found .

= = Economy = =

Up until 1962 , before the pass was sealed , goods such as pens , watches , cereals , cotton cloth , edible oils , soaps , building materials , and dismantled scooters and four @-@ wheelers were exported to Tibet through the pass on mule @-@ back . Two hundred mules , each carrying about 80 kilograms (180 lb) of load , were used to ferry goods from Gangtok to Lhasa , which used to take 20 ? 25 days . Upon return , silk , raw wool , musk pods , medicinal plants , country liquor , precious stones , gold , and silverware were imported into India . Most of the trade in those days was carried out by the Marwari community , which owned 95 % of the 200 authorised firms .

Since July 2006 , trading is open Mondays through Thursdays . Exports from India exempted from duty include agricultural implements , blankets , copper products , clothes , cycles , coffee , tea , barley , rice , wheat , flour , dry fruits , vegetables , vegetable oil , tobacco , snuff , spices , shoes , kerosene oil , stationery , utensils , milk processed products , canned food , dyes , and local herbs . Chinese exports to India exempted from duty include goat skin , sheep skin , wool , raw silk , yak tail , yak hair , china clay , borax , butter , common salt , horses , goats , and sheep . Restrictions are placed on traders , with permits only given to those who were Sikkimese citizens before the kingdom merged with India in 1975 .

There were fears among some traders in India that Indian goods would find a limited outlet in Tibet , while China would have access to a ready market in Sikkim and West Bengal . The reopening of the pass was expected to stimulate the economy of the region and bolster Indo @-@ Chinese trade , but this has not happened . Figures released by the Tibet Autonomous Regional Bureau of Commerce show that in the 51 days of trading in 2006 , only US \$ 186 @,@ 250 worth of trade passed through Nathu La .

On the Indian side , only citizens of India can visit the pass on Wednesdays , Thursdays , Saturdays , and Sundays , after obtaining permits one day in advance in Gangtok . The pass is particularly useful for pilgrims visiting monasteries in Sikkim such as Rumtek , one of the holiest shrines in Buddhism . For Hindus , the pass reduces the journey time to Mansarovar Lake from fifteen to two days .

A major concern of the Indian government is the trafficking of wildlife products such as tiger and leopard skins and bones , bear gall bladders , otter pelts , and shahtoosh wool into India . The Indian government has undertaken a program to sensitise the police and other law enforcement agencies in the area . Most of such illicit trade currently takes place via Nepal .

= = = Transport = = =

On the Tibetan side two highways ? from Kangmar to Yadong and from Yadong to Nathu La ? were listed in the 2006 construction plans . Plans are also underway to extend the Qinghai @-@ Tibet Railway to Yadong over the next decade .

The nearest railheads are New Jalpaiguri (Siliguri) in India and Xigazê in China .

The Chinese government is planning to extend its rail service to Yadong , a few kilometers (miles)

from Nathu La . In addition , the Government of India is planning an extension of rail services from Sevoke in Darjeeling district to Sikkim 's capital Gangtok , 38 miles (61 km) from Nathu La .