

NathuLa Pass

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NathuLa Pass was a major corridor of passage between India and Tibet before it was closed in 1962. Located around 56kms from Gangtok at an altitude of 14450 ft, the road to NathuLa passes through the Tsomgo lake.

Geography of NathuLa Pass

- It is one of the highest motorable roads in the world and is richly surrounded by alpine flora.
- The pass is 56 kilometres east of the Sikkim capital, Gangtok, and 430 km from the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. Although just 5 km north of the all-weather Jelepala pass, the Nathula pass is blocked by snow in winters as it receives heavy snowfall.
- The vegetation on the road leading to NathuLa graduates from subtropical forests to temperate to wet and dry alpine to cold tundra desert devoid of vegetation.
- Yaks are found in these parts, and in many hamlets they serve as beasts of burden. On the Chinese side the pass leads to the Chumbi Valley of the Tibetan Plateau.

Economic and Strategic Significance

- The pass is India's third border post for trade with China after Shipkila in Himachal Pradesh and Lipulekh in Uttaranchal. It was only after India's former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's China visit in 2003 that the route was resumed. The Nathula Pass also serves as one of the 4 official Border Personnel Meeting points.

[Others are Chushul in Ladakh, BumLa pass in Tawang and Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand]

- Various reports have claimed that the opening of the trade route through NathuLa would not only benefit the

landlocked state of Sikkim but also its adjoining regions like the North East Region and West Bengal. They also envisioned that border trade would transform Sikkim into a dry port and Siliguri in West Bengal into a major trading centre.

- Strategically, the pass gains significance due to its proximity to the Chumbi valley and the Siliguri corridor. Chumbi Valley is located at the tri-junction of India-China-Bhutan. Any development in the Chumbi Valley that alters the status quo in Beijing's favour will have serious implications for India.
- For the Chinese side, close religious contact between Sikkim's Buddhists and their Tibetan counterparts is a matter of concern. Sikkim's Rumtek monastery acts as the seat of Karmapa (one of the most important leaders in Tibetan Buddhism).