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Urgent Need for Steps to Make Nathu La Route to Kailash Mansarovar Safe for Pilgrims

2 Dec, 2014 [R. K. Bhandari](#) [View14440](#) [Comments 0](#)

India and China had signed a bilateral agreement on September 18 this year providing for conducting the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra to Sikkim Himalayas in addition to the existing Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand. Addressing the media after the signing of the MoU in this regard, Narendra Modi said the new route offers many benefits. "It makes Kailash Mansarovar accessible by a motorable road, which is especially for pilgrims. It offers a safer alternative in the rainy season, makes the pilgrimage shorter in duration and will enable a much higher number of pilgrims to go there," he said.

However, the bad news is that whereas China may be able to do its bit to take necessary steps to ensure the safety of the route before it opens, India may still be fighting with the systemic inertia to remove vulnerabilities for ensuring a hiccup free, smooth passage to the pilgrims, especially on its side of the border.

Of course, this bad news is somewhat obscured by another good news that by now we not only know the weak links in our chain of operations for our disaster management systems, but additionally, we have also been repeatedly taught the do's and don'ts of life by none other than ourselves. Every now and then, we have passed through the tides of pain and suffering which are now so intense as to drive us to the point where through which pilgrims will be able to reach Mansarovar next year, literally means a Pass with ears that listen. We too need listening ears. The cries of those affected will continue to haunt us! It is therefore time to act.

Ordinarily hard core pilgrims are neither deterred by dangers that they might face when it comes to pilgrimage, nor do they fear the disaster-inflicted death, destruction and sufferings, told to them by the previous generation. This is because they value faith, devotion and salvation more than they fear death. It is the duty of the government, however, to protect the pilgrims from dangers of all shades and colors. As reported in the News from China, September 2014 Issue, a total of nearly 70,000 Indian citizens have travelled to Tibet for pilgrimage in the last few years. The number of pilgrims has shot up from a mere 400 in 2003 to 14,084 in 2013, a whopping 35 fold increase!

Nathu La is already attracting tourists because of its fascinating altitude of 4310m, Tsomgo Lake, Baba Mandir and the fun of a handshake at the border fence. Once the route is opened for pilgrimage, the elderly and the sick will also not like to be left behind regardless of the risks and dangers of which they may or may not be aware at this time. They will need acclimatisation, medicare and all kinds of support services. In the event of border skirmishes and natural calamities, they will need much more than the so called preparedness. Even then pilgrims may not get deterred by anticipated dangers, no matter how serious, because after all, Nathu La had already been on the old map between India and China, and it, even now continues to be one of the three open trading borders.¹ Moreover, if Jawaharlal Nehru and his government decided to reach Bhutan via Nathu La more than half a century ago, then why not the pilgrims now? The Nathu La route may have remained closed for decades after the Sino-Indian war of 1962 but India's armed forces have always been there and trade through Nathu La has already resumed since 6 July 2006. Further, widening of the Gangtok- Nathu La highway is presently in progress and, en route, the tourists are already benefiting from amenities such as the high altitude internet cafe and ATM machines. Where is the danger to the pilgrims and why so much fuss, then?

The danger is in the environmental fragility of the terrain, the high seismicity of the area, neglect of slope management, alarming proneness to landsliding, poor infrastructure and inadequacy of disaster prevention and management capacity. The promised motorable road would attract pilgrims of all ages and in turn increase tourist population leading to demand for more civic amenities, hotels, human settlements, shops. Being a strategically sensitive area, border skirmishes cannot be ruled out. Increased vehicle population will also show up at all times and result in road blocks. Enhanced border trade through Nathu La would further add to the pressure on the civil and military administration. The faces of the pilgrims, tourists and traders will therefore come only when all these issues are sorted out in good time.

Pilgrims, tourists and traders will have to be prepared to face low temperatures, bumpy roads in difficult terrain, and landslides en route. It might happen if late in the evening, a portion of road in front of a vehicle is lost in a landslide or blocked by a pile of boulders, with no communication. In such a situation, it may take hours for help to arrive and days before the road could be restored.

For travel to Nathu La, pilgrims will have to travel to Gangtok first and then take the Jawaharlal Nehru highway to Nathu La. Both the routes are beset with landslides of every shade and description which is why the hardships and danger will literally travel with them as co-passengers right from the first encounter with the landslide at mile post 9 on the Siliguri- Gangtok road was in 1964 and the very same landslide continues to be a problem.

today. Similarly, Gangtok-Nathu La road too has a number of active landslide spots of which mile 15 has been known to be notorious for just 62 kilometres away from Gangtok with two and a half hours of travel time, but the time one might actually take is always decided by a trinity of landslides, bumpy roads and bad weather.

The history of landslides on Siliguri- Gangtok and Gangtok- Nathu La roads are as old as the roads themselves. In fact, several landslides routes even before the roads existed and many more were added during the road construction. Not to speak of the historic times, as recently in 2012, nearly 4000 tourists got stranded because of a landslide between Gangtok and Tsomgo Lake. It started at about 3pm and was hampering the relief operations. Again, the spot was 15th mile stone. A few months later, in September 2012, a major landslide killed an incident, on 23 July 2014, 130 people were evacuated by the army when about two dozen vehicles on the Nathu La –Changu road landslides between the 15th mile and the 17th mile. The area is prone to the added threat of earthquake induced landslide because of the area. The Sikkim earthquake of 18 September 2011 of magnitude of 6.8 had its epicentre only 68 kilometres northeast of Gangtok, a region.

Once the new route to Kailash Mansarovar is operational, the pilgrims may either continue to patronize the traditional route or take the one upon whichever is safer and more convenient. We have experienced the joys and sorrows of the traditional route for decades. For those on the route, the starting point for pilgrims on the map of Uttarakhand is Dharchula. The route runs along Tawaghat, Gosku, Mangti, Jibti, Lamahari and Budhi eventually leading to the Indo-China border at Lipu Lekh Pass. One has to then cross Takla Kot and Parkha to arrive at Lake. This route is highly vulnerable to landslides.

When the great Malpa rock avalanche tragedy occurred on this route on 17-18 August 2014, nearly 210 people were killed including 60 pilgrims. Malpa was traditionally inhabited by tribal people, engaged in trade with Tibet, for generations. With the patronage of pilgrims, the route grew with human activity, as a base camp. Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam established their cottages for pilgrims to halt and rest here. Public works, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, and the local tribal people also put up their huts and buildings, on the bank of the river Kali. On the fateful night, a rock got detached from the head region of the parent rock, broke into myriad of pieces, and eventually hurtled down the slope to bury itself under a 5-15 metre thick pile of debris. The disaster management apparatus broke into pieces as badly as the mountain itself.

If a particular route is troublesome, it is normal to look for an alternate route for safer pilgrimage. However, such projects demand defining twin questions – Is abandoning of the troublesome route the only answer and how confident are we that new route is free from trouble and not be worse than malady? After the Uttarakhand tragedy of June 2013, the old 14 Km long route to the Kedarnath shrine via Gaurikund has been literally erased from our landscape forever by the joint action of men and nature. A recent media report suggests that several alternate routes are on the drawing table. One possibility under consideration is of a 24 km long route from Sonprayag to Kedarnath at the higher altitudes both Gaurikund and Rambara. The other possibility under consideration is to drive to Chaumasi on Kalimath-Kotma road from Guptkashi via Kham Bugyal and Reka Bugyal. Yet another suggestion is to travel from Sonprayag to Gaurikund and thereafter trek 7km to Bhirwani Linchauli and take a helicopter or trek again a distance of 6km to Kedarnath. It is also reported that a task force has been constituted for completion of the project by April 2014 which is long gone.

The routes in difficult and fragile terrains are not decided by running a pencil over a map or by the known contours of convenience or by setting unreasonable deadlines such as the above. It requires a well trained dedicated outfit with multi-disciplinary expertise, made possible by the production of user-friendly, large scale multi-hazard maps. The mapping has to be done following a systematic process of spatial analysis, investigation, and safety analysis with full awareness of the implications of climate change in the backdrop of the past history and future programs. Currently, most of the hazard-mapping programmes are open-ended, more for testing latest GIS softwares and proving our maps rather than for projecting realistic hazard scenarios, making people aware of the hazards and forewarning them of impending dangers.

It is the obligation of the government to provide pilgrims user-friendly and reliable hazard maps and route-related information so that they can make informed choices. While we put our acts together to produce the first set of user-friendly hazard maps, the least we should do is provide tourist maps showing all major old and new landslide trouble spots with clear statements on Do's and Don'ts. The future lies in ruthless identification of sources of recurring hazard and zero tolerance towards mindless urbanization.

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Endnotes

The other two being Shipkila in Himachal Pradesh and Lipulekh in Uttarakhand

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