

China opens Nathu La as second route for Kailash- Manasarovar Yatra pilgrims

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New Delhi: China on Monday opened the second land crossing in Tibet via Nathu La to allow the first batch of Indian pilgrims undertaking the arduous Kailash- Manasarovar Yatra, in the latest confidence-building measure between the two neighbours.

The opening of the second route through the Himalayan pass of Nathu La in Sikkim, 4,000 metres above sea level, was officially announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China last month and will allow more Indians to undertake the pilgrimage.

The new route is in addition to the existing Lipulekh Pass, the only route that was badly damaged in the floods in Uttarakhand in 2013.

A total of 44 pilgrims crossed over from the Indian side of the border in Sikkim today as the first batch of the annual Yatra through this border route and were warmly welcomed by Chinese officials in Tibet.

The pilgrims belonging to different age-groups and hailing from various parts of India made their way to the Nathu La pass after a two week-long journey acclimatising themselves for the high-altitude journey to Kailash which stands at an altitude of about 6,500 metres in Tibet.

The pilgrims, who form the first batch of 250 people permitted to crossover to China this year to take part in the Yatra regarded as the most important pilgrimage for Hindus, appeared excited and cheerful.

"It is a lifetime opportunity for me to visit the Kailash-Manasarovar. There is nothing more in life I look for," Bharat Das, one of the pilgrims, told PTI.

The pilgrims, several of whom were middle-aged and retired, said they have been looking for this kind of an opportunity since long.

They said it was good fortune to undertake the Yatra through a comfortable route and went on to thank the Chinese authorities for facilitating the new route.

The route through Nathu La Pass will facilitate comfortable travel for Indian pilgrims by buses, especially for elderly Indian citizens, though conditions in the Himalayan region with less oxygen levels still pose a challenge.

Yesterday, Chinese Ambassador to India Le Yucheng arrived here from the the Indian side, becoming the first Chinese official to cross the border through the new route.

Le, along with Councillor in the Indian Embassy Beijing Shriya Dutta Kumar and top Chinese officials of Tibet, welcomed the pilgrims as they crossed over.

Chinese President Xi Jinping had promised opening the new route for the Yatra to Modi during the former's maiden visit to New Delhi in September last year.

Modi wanted the second route for the Yatra, keeping in view the terrain difficulties through the existing routes through Uttarakhand and Nepal which involve arduous journey, including heavy trekking and travel on the backs of mules.

The Nathu La route will enable pilgrims to travel the 1,500 km-long route from Nathu La to Kailash by buses.

Welcoming the pilgrims, Le said the Chinese side, especially the provincial government of the Tibet Autonomous Region has done a lot of preparations to open the new route by building new hotels, improving roads, training translators, tour guides and preparation of Indian food.

He said this route is more comfortable and safer than the old one.

"Instead of travelling through rough terrain facing high risks, you can reach the sacred place in bus while enjoying the heavenly beauty along the way," he said.

"I am sure the Indian friends can feel the warm hospitality and profound friendship of Chinese people," he said, adding that the Indian pilgrims will not only will gain spiritual strength but also develop better understanding of China.

Over 80,000 Indian pilgrims visited Kailash in the last decade braving the hardships, he said.

"We, on the Chinese side, understand very well how Kailash-Manasarovar features in the Indian minds and will do whatever we can to make the yatra pleasant and a memorable one," Le said.

The External Affairs Ministry that organises the Yatra permits over 1,000 pilgrims a year in 18 batches for the Yatra. The entire trip is of 23 days, of which 19 days are meant for travelling while the for medical check-ups. It costs around Rs 1.80 lac for each pilgrim.

The first batch is led by Tarun Vijay, the BJP Rajya Sabha MP who has written a book on the importance of Kailash-Manasarovar.

He said: "It is not only pilgrimage but also the pilgrimage of friendship between India and China" and opens a new era of relations between the two countries.

Terming the new route as a historic move and a milestone in India-China relations, Indian Ambassador to China Ashok K Kantha Ashok K Kantha whose speech was read out by Kumar expressed gratitude to China for allowing the second pass.

"The new pilgrimage route is another enduring symbol of the rich and growing people-to-people bonds between India and China. Relations between India and China are on a continuous growth path," he said.

Despite the short time lag in landmark meetings between Xi and Modi, "our two countries signed as many as 50 agreements during Prime Minister Modi's visit to China, including government-to-government understandings and business deals," he said.

"Today, the relationship between the world's two largest developing countries and fastest-growing economies embraces multiple spheres of interaction such as economic, cultural, defence, space and other areas.

"The age-old spiritual connect is an essential component of contemporary mutual understanding," he said, adding that "a diverse and dynamic people-to-people engagement is central to this effort, and the opening of the route through Nathu La is a further milestone".

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"It cements the strong civilisational linkages forged over centuries that provide the fountainhead of our shared cultural space, Kantha said.

"We appreciate the hard work of the Chinese side to ensure all facilities for the comfort of the pilgrims, he added.

The Yadong county in Tibet where Nathu La pass was located on Chinese side is decorated with banners to welcome the pilgrims.

The Yatra has been organised by the External Affairs Ministry since 1981 through Lipu Pass in Himalayas connecting the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand in India with the old trading town of Taklakot in Tibet.

A total of 1,330 Yatris will be able to undertake the Yatra this year, which includes 250 Yatris via Nathula in 5 batches of 50 each. 1,080 Yatris will go via Lipulekh in 18 batches of 60 each.

- PTI