

UNPLANNED CONSTRUCTION



North Sikkim Highway in Shambles

Tamanna Tamang writes that the North Sikkim Highway's rundown condition is resulting in serious inconvenience not only to commuters but also affecting the Indian Army's movement

The North Sikkim Highway is not just a road that connects the North District to the rest of the world; it's not less than a route to the paradise on earth' says Nosang Limboo, a wildlife photographer and adventure tour guide who visits the North District frequently. But the highway that connects the North District with the rest of the country remains in a dilapidated

condition troubling daily commuters and tourists who crave for an adventure trip to the beautiful valleys and lakes in the North.

Road Trouble

The condition of the NS Highway upto zero point in Yuma, Samdung close to the Indo-China border has worsened post the devastating earthquake in September 2011 which hit the district badly

with its epicentre being in Mangon, North District headquarters. Like in many other states, the roads in Sikkim are looked after by the Border Roads Organization under Project Swastik. The Jawaharlal Nehru Marg that leads to Nathula, Indo-China Border and North Sikkim Highway is under 'double laning' which has further worsened the condition of the roads.

'The double laning of the high-

way started around five years back but due to the earthquake, the plan had to be revised and the construction work slowed down. It may take another five to seven years to complete,' informs S S Porwal, Chief Engineer, BRO. 'The first priority right now is Gangtok and NH 31 A is getting the highest attention and resources. However, people travelling from Siliguri to North Sikkim are travelling via the Singtam-Dikchu road that leads to North District headquarters, this road is well-maintained', he adds.

Tour Operators' Dilemma

Rajen Chhetri, a Gangtok-based tour operator who organizes trips to North Sikkim says 'Travelling on the roads during night time can prove fatal, as there is a high risk of accidents on the NS Highway during the night. Last month, four tourists from Ahmadabad died after their vehicle tumbled down the road while coming back to Gangtok'. Many a times, the tourists do not want to halt in the North as it extends a day from a package and adds on to their budget, thus, they return back to Gangtok at night risking their lives.

Nosang Limboo who also operates Himalayan Rumveeks Adventure Tours shares, 'The complaining about the road starts right from a few miles away from Siliguri as we pick up the guests from the airport. A few places in North Sikkim such as Theng is a nightmare! At the same time, roads are the lifeline for tourism in Sikkim, and, as such, I hope the ongoing widening of the road completes soon'.

Planned Intervention Essential

The recently elected MLA of the Kabi-Lungtsok, North Sikkim has written to Defence Minister Arun

Jaitley requesting for a 'thorough investigation against careless, haphazard and unplanned widening of the North Sikkim Highway by GREF for decades'. Again, Ugen Nedup Bhutia, Sikkim Kranti Kari Morcha MLA in his letter points out that the North Sikkim Highway is important both for the local people and from the national security perspective, 'The manner in which the widening of the route has been taken up by 129 RCC (GREF) is not only loathsome but requires a thorough investigation,' he writes. He goes on to say that the North Sikkim Highway project was taken up about a decade ago but the project is yet to be completed. GREF had earned the suo-moto censure of the High Court of Sikkim following the visit of the then Chief Justice of Sikkim, Justice Permod Kohli, accompanied by Supreme Court Judge Justice Altamas Kabir and Justice



The way to paradise is a ride through hell

Sonam P Wangdi of Sikkim High Court to the area. Besides, there is also a PIL in the High Court on the poor conditions of the North Sikkim Highway.

The road up there in North Sikkim is also very strategically important for the Indian Army, the tourists may stop for a while but the Army can't. And, the best way to widen the road would be to work kilometre by kilometre rather than digging here and there. This way, fewer disturbances will be caused to the road transport, the scarcity of labourers would be taken care of and man-power can be increased in a particular site. North Sikkim has breathtakingly beautiful tourist spots; for promoting such places, the roadways are the only medium we have at our disposal. Needless to say, the higher authorities need to act before it is too late. 🌟

Tamanna Tamang is a freelance journalist based in Gangtok
Photos: Tamanna Tamang